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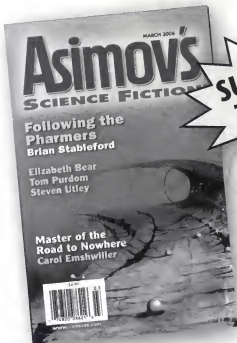
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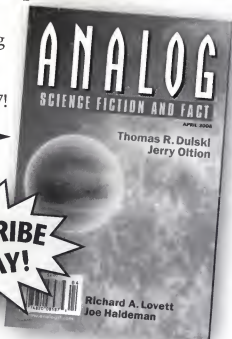
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JUNE 2008

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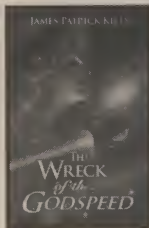
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MAKING AN ENTRANCE

What is it about a story that catches my attention and convinces me to continue reading? What is it about the opening of a story that tells me I'm in the hands of someone who knows what they are doing and where they are going and that there's a good chance I'm going to enjoy joining them on their literary journey? Several times a month, I sit down to read through dozens and dozens of stories. These tales sit in large stacks on my office bookcase and they represent the unknown. Some of these stories are going to blow me away, but the trick is always to find those tales. The physical work of producing *Asimov's* ensures that there is never enough time to give each story submission the attention it deserves. Yet, from these stacks, with clockwork regularity, will come the material that will constitute upcoming issues of the magazine.

Over the years, other editors and I have given writers the glib advice that they must grab us by the throat with the first paragraph or all is lost. The truth is that because I have so much material to read, a story must get my attention early and manage to hold onto it, or I'll put the manuscript down and proceed to the next one on the pile. While passing this information along was meant to be helpful, it has also meant that I've seen an overabundance of stories that start off with exploding spaceships and then dump me into the pandemonium that ensues. Of course, I have

nothing against stories about stricken spaceships—"Marooned off Vesta," Isaac Asimov's first published story, continues to hold a warm place in my memory, and I loved Kristine Kathryn Rusch's Readers' Award-winning novella "Diving Into the Wreck"—but our magazine can't survive on one type of story alone.

I know I see some of these stories *because* I've indicated that a story has to be exciting to keep me reading, and there are few situations dicier than an accident in space. Still, even exploding spaceship stories can become predictable. Pondering this conundrum has led me to the realization that it's not just excitement that I'm after when I'm perusing the first few paragraphs of a new story. Last spring I was chatting with the highly respected author Barry N. Malzberg, who has been an editor and a literary agent as well, and we both concluded that in addition to looking for an intriguing opening, the editor is looking for a sense that the writer is in total control of his or her material and has a sure hand on where the story is going. While not all of these stories will be right for me, this confidence is a characteristic of the stories that I do publish.

To improve my own understanding of what works for me, I thought I'd take a look at the openings of a couple of the stories that have leapt up and grabbed my esophagus. One such tale, "To the East, a Bright Star" by James Maxey, appeared in

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the same issue as Kris Rusch's aforementioned story. James's writing was completely unknown to me when I read the following:

There was a shark in the kitchen. The shark wasn't huge, maybe four feet long, gliding across the linoleum toward the refrigerator. Tony stood motionless in the knee-deep water of the dining room. The Wolfman said that the only sharks that came this far in were bull sharks, which could live in either salt or fresh water, and were highly aggressive. Tony leaned forward cautiously and shut the door to the kitchen. He had known the exact time and date of his death for most of his adult life. With only hours to go, he wasn't about to let the shark do something ironic.

Clearly a shark in the kitchen is an unusual situation. It may even be a life-threatening one, but the author has also managed to show us that something even more dire is lurking in the pages ahead—and he does so with a bit of wit as well. One has to read further to figure out what the clues mean, but these are the sort of cues that make me want to turn the page and find out what's in store.

In this very issue we have a couple of stories by brand new *Asimov's* authors. Derek Künsken's tale of life "Beneath Sunlit Shallows" begins with the following:

Vincent dreamed again that he swam behind a child-like Merced, out of the cold dark, rising toward an unknown sun. He didn't see the sun, which could only penetrate two hundred meters of water. He wanted, the way one does

in dreams, to see it, ignoring the fact that if he saw even its depth-attenuated blue light, he would already be dead.

These lines immediately introduce me to a character with a human name who seems to be in a nonhuman situation. Why is he under water? Why would he be dead if he saw the sun? Looking for the answer to this question definitely convinced me to plunge into the rest of Derek's story.

Felicity Shoulders' "Burgerdroid" begins more quietly:

"I don't want to go!" Henry said, pushing his lunchbox out of sight behind the sofa to gain time.

"I don't want to go either. But I am subject to the tyranny of capitalism, and you are subject to the tyranny of me." I fished out the lunchbox and closed Henry's fingers over the handle.

"It isn't fair," Henry said. "Other people have weekends on Saturday."

"Of course it's not fair. That's why it's called 'tyranny.'"

This beginning is not as exciting as an exploding spaceship, but it does start off with a fascinating voice. The exchange between mother and child rings true, and the dialog made me want to find out more about this "tyranny."

This editorial is too short to fully resolve what it is that makes a story work for me, but I hope these snippets have provided a little insight into what it takes to grab my attention. Why these tales kept me reading after their initial assault on my tender throat is another story. Perhaps it is a tale best resolved by looking for the rest of these latter two stories (which begin on p. 77 and p. 49) and seeing for yourself. ○

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THE DEATH OF GALLIUM

I mourn for the dodo, poor fat flightless bird, extinct since the eighteenth century. I grieve for the great auk, virtually wiped out by zealous Viking hunters a thousand years ago and finished off by hungry Greenlanders around 1760. I think the world would be more interesting if such extinct creatures as the moa, the giant ground sloth, the passenger pigeon, and the quagga still moved among us. It surely would be a lively place if we had a few tyrannosaurs or brontosaurus on hand. (Though not in *my* neighborhood, please.) And I'd find it great fun to watch one of those PBS nature documentaries showing the migratory habits of the woolly mammoth. They're all gone, though, along with the speckled cormorant, Steller's sea cow, the Hispaniola hutia, the aurochs, the Irish elk, and all too many other species.

But now comes word that it isn't just wildlife that can go extinct. The element gallium is in very short supply and the world may well run out of it in just a few years. Indium is threatened too, says Armin Reller, a materials chemist at Germany's University of Augsburg. He estimates that our planet's stock of indium will last no more than another decade. All the hafnium will be gone by 2017 also, and another twenty years will see the extinction of zinc. Even copper is an endangered item, since worldwide demand for it is likely to exceed available supplies by the end of the present century.

Running out of oil, yes. We've all been concerned about that for many years and everyone anticipates a time when the world's underground petroleum reserves will have been pumped dry. But oil is just an organic substance that was created by natural biological processes; we know that we have a lot of it, but we're using it up very rapidly, no more is being created, and someday it'll be gone. The disappearance of *elements*, though—that's a different matter. I was taught long ago that the ninety-two elements found in nature are the essential building blocks of the universe. Take one away—or three, or six—and won't the essential structure of things suffer a potent blow? Somehow I feel that there's a powerful difference between running out of oil, or killing off all the dodos, and having elements go extinct.

I've understood the idea of extinction since I was a small boy, staring goggle-eyed at the dinosaur skeletons in New York City's American Museum of Natural History. Bad things happen—a climate change, perhaps, or the appearance on the scene of very efficient new predators—and whole species of animals and plants vanish, never to return. But elements? The extinction of entire elements, the disappearance of actual chunks of the periodic table, is not something I've ever given a moment's thought to. Except now, thanks to Armin Reller of the University of Augsburg.

The concept has occasionally

turned up in science fiction. I remember reading, long ago, S.S. Held's novel *The Death of Iron*, which was serialized in Hugo Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* starting in September, 1932. (No, I'm not *that* old—but a short-lived SF magazine called *Wonder Story Annual* reprinted the Held novel in 1952, when I was in college, and that's when I first encountered it.)

Because I was an assiduous collector of old science fiction magazines long ago, I also have that 1932 Gernsback magazine on my desk right now. Gernsback frequently bought translation rights to European science fiction books for his magazine, and *The Death of Iron* was one of them. The invaluable Donald Tuck *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy* tells me that Held was French, and *La Mort du Fer* was originally published in Paris in 1931. Indeed, the sketch of Held in *Wonder Stories*—Gernsback illustrated every story he published with a sketch of its author—shows a man of about forty, quintessentially French in physiognomy, with a lean, tapering face, intensely penetrating eyes, a conspicuous nose, an elegant dark goatee. Not even a Google search turns up any scrap of biographical information about him, but at least, thanks to Hugo Gernsback, I know what he looked like.

The Death of Iron is, as its name implies, a disaster novel. A mysterious disease attacks the structural integrity of the machinery used by a French steel company. "The modifications of the texture of the metal itself," we are told—the translation is by Fletcher Pratt, himself a great writer of fantasy and science fiction in an earlier era—"these dry, dusty knots encysted in the mass, some of

them imperceptible to the naked eye and others as big as walnuts; these cinder-like stains, sometimes black and sometimes blue, running through the steel, seemed to have been produced by a process unknown to modern science." Which is indeed the case: a disease, quickly named siderosis, is found to have attacked everything iron at the steel plant, and the disease proves to be contagious, propagating itself from one piece of metal to another. Everything made of iron turns porous and crumbles.

Sacre bleu! Quel catastrophe! No more airplanes, no more trains or buses, no bridges, no weapons, no scissors, no shovels, no can-openers, no high-rise buildings. Subtract one vital element and in short order society collapses into Neolithic anarchy, and then into a nomadic post-technological society founded on mysticism and magic. This forgotten book has an exciting tale to tell, and tells it very well.

It's just a fantasy, of course. In the real world iron is in no danger of extinction from strange diseases, nor is our supply of it running low. And, though I said a couple of paragraphs ago that the ninety-two natural elements are essential building blocks of the universe, the truth is that we've been getting along without two of them—numbers 85 and 87 in the periodic table—for quite some time. The periodic table indicates that they ought to be there, but they're nowhere to be found in nature. Element 85, astatine, finally was synthesized at the University of California in 1940. It's a radioactive element with the very short half-life of 8.3 hours, and whatever supply of it was present at the creation of the world vanished billions of years ago. The other blank place

in the periodic table, the one that should have been occupied by element 87, was filled in 1939 by a French scientist, who named it, naturally, francium. It is created by the radioactive decay of actinium, which itself is a decay product of uranium-235, and has a half-life of just 21 minutes. So for all intents and purposes the world must do without element 87, and we are none the worse for that.

Gallium, though—

Gallium's atomic number is 31. It's a blue-white metal first discovered in 1831, and has certain unusual properties, like a very low melting point and an unwillingness to oxidize, that make it useful as a coating for optical mirrors, a liquid seal in strongly heated apparatus, and a substitute for mercury in ultraviolet lamps. It's also quite important in making the liquid-crystal displays used in flat-screen television sets and computer monitors.

As it happens, we are building a lot of flat-screen TV sets and computer monitors these days. Gallium is thought to make up 0.0015 percent of the Earth's crust and there are no concentrated supplies of it. We get it by extracting it from zinc or aluminum ore or by smelting the dust of furnace flues. Dr. Reller says that by 2017 or so there'll be none left to use. Indium, another endangered element—number 49 in the periodic table—is similar to gallium in many ways, has many of the same uses (plus some others—it's a gasoline additive, for example, and a component of the control rods used in nuclear reactors) and is being consumed much faster than we are finding it. Dr. Reller gives it about another decade. Hafnium, element 72, is in only slightly better

shape. There aren't any hafnium mines around; it lurks hidden in minute quantities in minerals that contain zirconium, from which it is extracted by a complicated process that would take me three or four pages to explain. We use a lot of it in computer chips and, like indium, in the control rods of nuclear reactors, but the problem is that we don't *have* a lot of it. Dr. Reller thinks it'll be gone somewhere around 2017. Even zinc, commonplace old zinc that is alloyed with copper to make brass, and which the United States used for ordinary one-cent coins when copper was in short supply in World War II, has a Reller extinction date of 2037. (How does a novel called *The Death of Brass* grab you?)

Zinc was never rare. We mine millions of tons a year of it. But the supply is finite and the demand is infinite, and that's bad news. Even copper, as I noted above, is deemed to be at risk. We humans move to and fro upon the earth, gobbling up everything in sight, and some things aren't replaceable.

Solutions will be needed, if we want to go on having things like television screens and solar panels and computer chips. Synthesizing the necessary elements, or finding workable substitutes for them, is one obvious idea. Recycling these vanishing elements from discarded equipment is another. We can always try to make our high-tech devices more efficient, at least so far as their need for these substances goes. And discovering better ways of separating the rare elements from the matrices in which they exist as bare traces would help—the furnace-flue solution. (Platinum, for example, always in short supply, constitutes 1.5 parts per

million of urban dust and grime, which is ever-abundant.)

But the sobering truth is that we still have millions of years to go before our own extinction date, or so we hope, and at our present rate of consumption we are likely to deplete most of the natural resources this planet has handed us. We have set up breeding and conservation programs to guard the few remain-

ing whooping cranes, Indian rhinoceroses, and Siberian tigers. But we can't exactly set up a reservation somewhere where the supply of gallium and hafnium can quietly replenish itself. And once the scientists have started talking about our chances of running out of *copper*, we know that the future is rapidly moving in on us and big changes lie ahead. ○

WAR GODS

1. Problem Child

At the first clatter of spears, Ares would race from Olympus to join in. He didn't care who won, but killed warriors on either side, evening the odds to keep the game alive.

Wounded, he always came to his father. Zeus bound up the injuries of this perverted god, his child, the cursed fruit of his union with Hera. Is it any wonder that their marriage bed was cold?

2. The Case for War

To kneeling priests, the taloned god spelled out his terms:

A great sun temple.

Constant flower wars for captives.

One warrior sacrificed for every temple step.

War for planting. War for harvest. War everlasting, in Huitzilopochtli's name.

"Do this, and I will protect you."

"Protect us from what, Great Lord?"

"From those gods who are even worse than I am."

The priests trembled to think of it, and obeyed.

3. Theogeny

Skanda, god of war, slew the demon Taraka, the Invincible. There was peace at last.

"Ha! Did you see him wielding six weapons?" said Agni, god of fire.

"That's my boy!"

"I saw him fight brilliantly," answered Shiva, "if you mean my son, Skanda."

"My son, Skanda," said Agni.

"Skanda, my child," insisted the Destroyer, picking up his trident.

Agni readied his fire dart. The other gods chose sides.

SON OF GALLIMAUFRY

nostalgia

As I burned in deadline hell while struggling to put this installment together, it occurred to me that I had been writing "On The Net" for quite some time now. How long? When I pulled up my bibliography, my jaw dropped. We began our magical mystery tour of cyberspace ten years ago to the day. A decade.

Time freaking flies!

I just reread my initial column, entitled "Start," for the first time since it was published in June of 1998 and was struck by a couple of things. I spent a lot of space laboring to make the rhetorical point that the net was very much like science fiction—since it hadn't really happened yet. I whined that the hardware was excruciatingly slow and unreliable, the software was buggy and that most of the sites were "Under Construction." Remember those goofy yellow animated **gifs of guys with shovels** mikesfreegifts.com/main4/page_9.html? They were everywhere back then! Here's how I ended my argument:

I bring this up not to complain (well, sort of to complain), but to make the point that whatever it is that we've got now, it isn't the net. Not yet. What we've got is the first paragraph of the first draft of a projected decology.

I'd say today that we're at least up to page 107 of Volume II. Is there any question that the net is on its way to being the most important communications medium on the planet?

The other thing about that initial effort that jumps off the screen at me is that I was very much finding my way as a columnist, never having done anything of the sort before. What exactly was I supposed to be typing? All Sheila and Gardner had said was that I should write about the web with a genre slant. At first, I took that to mean that I should come up with interesting websites that you could click. Those earliest installments were just that: nothing more than a random walk through my favorites list. The truth is that back then I doubted I could squeeze out more than a dozen or so columns before I'd use up all the good sites. But as I got the hang of columnizing, my focus changed. I didn't want to write about which sites were interesting so much as I wanted to discuss *why* were they interesting. **IMHO** [acronyms.thefreedictionary.com/IMHO](http://acronyms.thefreedictionary.com/)>, that is. And thus a **monster** pundit was created. I sometimes cringe as I'm writing these columns and notice that I've nattered on for hundreds of my allotted seventeen hundred words and haven't yet given a URL.

Which is why I will now stop wax-

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ing nostalgic and, well, start waxing nostalgic in a different way. In a column I wrote five years ago called "Gallimaufry"—I just love that word, look it up!—I explained that one of the problems with writing themed columns was that I kept discovering terrific sites that didn't quite fit into an essay. And so, in the spirit of the dawn of "On the Net," here's a selection of some of my current faves that have no relation whatsoever to one another.

good clicks

Science fiction lost one of its most lively websites in 2006 when the Hugo Award winning fanzine **Emerald City** <emcit.com> posted its final issue. But now the folks who brought you **Emcit**, **Cheryl Morgan** <cheryl-morgan.com> and **Kevin Standlee** <kevin-standlee.livejournal.com> are back with **The Science Fiction Awards Watch** <sfawardswatch.com>. As they write, "The science fiction and fantasy industry has lots of awards. We watch them, we report on them, we talk about them. Simple." When I first heard about SFAW I wondered how Cheryl and Kevin could sustain interest in a site that is aimed at a niche in the genre. But their concept for the site has been proved, at least to my satisfaction. They list sixty-two separate awards programs that touch on our genre, and it seems as if there is usually news and/or controversy swirling around all of them. One intriguing feature of SFAW is the book discussion forum, where from time to time the editors assemble a distinguished panel of writers and editors to kick the tires of potential award contenders. What makes this different from the standard review is that the

critics on the panel are in dialogue—and sometimes in disagreement—with one another. A new addition to the site is the SF Editors wiki. Now that there are Hugo Awards for Best Editor (Long Form) and (Short Form), informed voters will need to keep track of which editor bought what book or story. This data is not easy to come by except to industry insiders, and the wiki is intended to make it available to everyone.

While we're on the subject of awards, the **Hugos** <thehugoawards.org> have a spiffy new home where you can look up past winners, explore the intricacies of the preferential voting method, read about the history of the award, and, in case you haven't poked a stick in a hornet's nest recently, discover how to propose changes to the rules.

As I write this, the short fiction review website **Tangent Online** <tangentonline.com> has been on sabbatical for almost four months. Luckily for fans of the short form, a new site, **The Fix** <thefix-online.com>, has arrived on the scene. Andy Cox, of **TTA Press** <ttapress.com>, publisher of *Interzone* and *Black Static*, and **Eugie Foster** <eugiefoster.com> have created a site that is visually pleasing and intellectually stimulating. The size of their staff of columnists and reviewers is impressive. I counted over fifty; most are themselves working or aspiring writers. Of course, the skill and style of the reviewers vary; for the most part they give plot summaries and in some cases offer a critical, or at least a personal, reaction to the story. The intent would seem not so much to pass judgment as to describe stories that a reader might want to look for. The columns are quite astute—I can particularly recommend **James Van Pelt's** <sff.net/people/james>.

van.pelt> *The Day Job* and **Scott Danielson's** <*scottdanielson.blog.spot.com*> *Audiobook Fix*. The Fix is one of the most promising new sites of 2007.

The Atlas of the Universe <*atlas.oftheuniverse.com*> will make you feel insignificant—in a good way. Although the idea of this site, created by astrophysicist Richard Powell, is simple, the execution is elegant. It features a series of nine star maps, beginning with one that shows our nearest neighbors in space, the thirty-three stars that are within 12.5 light years of our solar system. The next map shows stars that are 250 light years from our sun, the one after that shows those that are five thousand light years away, and the one after that shows the entirety of the Milky Way, a loose spiral disc of two hundred billion stars, the farthest of which is fifty thousand light years distant from us. And that's just the beginning of the journey this wonderful site will take you on. By the time you open the last map, you are looking at the entire visible universe, thirty billion trillion stars that span fourteen billion light years. One insight that this science fiction writer takes away from the atlas is that, although faster than light travel seems more fantasy than

science fiction, if we ever should build a starship it is inconceivable that we won't bump into other life forms.

This summer my wife and I decided to cut back our cable TV to the basic minimum of twenty channels (gasp!) and rely on our **Netflix** <*netflix.com*> account for most of our media consumption. So far, no regrets. But I'd be hard pressed to decide what to add to my queue if I didn't have **Rotten Tomatoes** <*rotten tomatoes.com*> as a guide. This is a compendium of movie reviews—ranging from big print media like the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* to the savvy members of the Online Film Critics Society. Of course, many of you have already clicked RT—5.2 million readers do every month—but in case you haven't, join the crowd! What I like best about this site is that they give grades based on the critical consensus. By the time you read this, most of the movies that are now in theaters will be out on DVD—for example, *I Am Legend*, which got just a 64 percent, and *Beowulf*, which got a 70 percent. (I saw *Beowulf* in a 3D theater and would give it another 6 or 7 percent for some very special effects.) Check out some of our SF classics that are rated on the site: *The Day the Earth*

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Stood Still earns a 93 percent, while *Forbidden Planet* gets a well-deserved 94 percent. And my all-time guilty pleasure, *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, gets an 89 percent. Take that, Will Smith!

SFScope <sfscope.com> is SF's newest news site. Edited by Ian Randal Strock, SFScope wants to be your source for news about science fiction, fantasy, and horror. It's a little like **Locus Online** <locusmag.com>, only more wide-ranging and a little like **SciFi Wire** <scifi.com/scifiwire>, only stronger on news of the print world and not so media-centric. The reporting is succinct, the interface is clean and easy to navigate. SFScope has become one of my daily must-clicks.

The daily online comics anthology **Act-I-Vate** <community.livejournal.com/act_i_vate> is currently my favorite online graphic novel source. This is a collaborative of twenty-three talented artists who are making their bleeding edge work available to the world for free. Many of

them have more mainstream projects going, but feel the need to push boundaries. As Dan Goldman said in an interview, "I look at Act-I-Vate as a kind of a laboratory. I'm doing stuff that I don't know if anyone would publish—just yet anyway." I can particularly recommend Goldman's *Kelly* (no relation, that's for sure), Dean Haspiel's *Immortal*, and Mike Cavallo's *Parade*, although there is something for everyone at this immense site. **Warning:** Don't even think of sampling the fare here if you have anything important to do in the next eight hours.

exit

There you have it: a potpourri, a mishmashed medley, a *gallimaufry*, if you will, of sites to celebrate our decade of clicking URLs together. Let's plan to do this for another ten years, shall we? Who knows what volume of the decology we'll be up to by then. ○

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Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress has three books appearing in 2008: *Nano Comes to Clifford Falls and Other Stories*, a collection from Golden Gryphon; and two novels, *Dogs* (Tachyon) and *Steal Across the Sky* (Tor). All of those concern genetic engineering in one way or another, but the following story deals with a much older and more mysterious idea: what changes time can, and cannot, make in human lives.

This morning the bathroom mirror shows only a lone person—besides Caitlin herself, of course. Caitlin's hair is dirty and there's no time to wash it before Group, which starts in seven minutes. Time is always a problem for Caitlin; she's not good at it. She washes her face, brushes her teeth, and tries the effect of pinning her dirty hair on top of her head. She looks like a dork. More of a dork.

The woman in the mirror ignores Caitlin. Another person, the pre-adolescent boy, wanders out of the gray mist from wherever they live when they're not in her mirror. The woman and the boy also ignore each other. They always do.

"Fuck off," Caitlin says experimentally. They don't look at her, but the woman frowns and the boy grins at empty space. That's the most that Caitlin has ever been able to affect any of them: the odd cuss word or the funny one-liner. Not that she's any good at jokes, or at cussing. She will never be Seena.

Usually Caitlin avoids looking in mirrors at all in the morning because a crowd of people that early is just too hard to take. But two people seem . . . if not manageable, at least bearable. She studies them both through the toothpaste flecks.

The woman is maybe thirty-five. Too heavy but not really fat, dressed in wide-leg khaki pants and a yellow sweater. She carries an infant on one arm and may or may not be pregnant with another. Her hair is cut in a 1940's style, side-parted with a wave falling over one eye. The boy wears what appears to be purple garbage bags strung with tiny glowing wires.

His eyes are startlingly, aggressively blue, bluer than any sky Caitlin has ever seen. Otherwise, he looks like—

“Group in five minutes,” calls Hardin, rumbling down the hall like a snow plow. “Josh, Caitlin, Seena, five minutes.”

“Screw you,” Seena calls back from her room. That’ll lose her ten points, maybe even risk a session in the time-out room, but Seena won’t care. Caitlin drags the comb once more through her hair and tries tucking it behind her ears. No better.

“Four minutes,” Hardin brays, plowing back in the other direction.

Time. “*Had we world enough and time . . .*” “*Time is money.*” “*You can’t fool all of the people all of the time.*” Quotations slide through Caitlin’s head, like pearls on a string. Where do they come from? How does she know all this stuff?

She scrubs a spot of toothpaste off her sweater and picks at a hangnail. Briefly, for just a second, the woman with the baby on her hip looks outward and her gaze meets Caitlin’s. The woman shows no recognition. The boy in the purple garbage bags has disappeared, but a man in a silver brocade waistcoat, knee breeches, and elaborately tied white cravat strolls into the mirror, calling over his shoulder to someone hidden in mist.

“Caitlin!” Hardin bellows.

“Coming!”

She turns her back on the mirror just as the maternal woman and the knee-breeched man pass through each other like ghosts.

“Let’s review what we know about Cathcart Syndrome,” Dr. Jensen says, and everybody groans.

“Again?” Josh says. “Like we don’t already have this stuff coming out of our asses?”

“Language,” Dr. Jensen says mildly. She’s a tiny, middle-aged woman in a white doctor coat. Caitlin, lying in bed at night, can somehow never picture Dr. Jensen’s features. Along with so much else she can’t picture.

Josh draws, “Are you asking what language ‘ass’ is?”

Dr. Jensen ignores this, saying, “Let’s review the information for Seth,” and everybody looks at Seth, who blushes.

Caitlin feels sorry for him. He can’t be more than thirteen, skinny and pimply and scared, with ears that stick out like mailboxes. He only arrived on their floor yesterday, when Michael was transferred to another ward, and Caitlin knows what lies ahead for him. Roth, that fat prick, is already sharpening his talons. To make it worse, Seth is sitting next to Josh, blond and green-eyed Josh, who is probably the hottest guy Caitlin has ever seen. The contrast is painful.

Dr. Jensen says, “Who wants to start the review?”

“I will,” Pam says. Of course. Seena rolls her eyes: *Suck-up*. Caitlin grins.

Group is held in the lounge, a light-green room as windowless as all the others in the Manhattan Institute for Adolescent Behavior. A glass wall separates the room from the corridor where Hardin, three hundred pounds of fat and muscle, lounges on duty. Dr. Jensen perches on the edge of a chair as if she’s about to take flight. Her head tilts to one side. The

eight teenage patients—*four of each sex*, Seena said once, *like we're going to hold a fucking prom*—sprawl on sofas and arm chairs whose stuffing peeks from various slashes. Seena sits on the floor, her bones jutting sharply from her shoulders, wrists, cheeks. Caitlin wishes she looked like Seena, but the only way she could get that slim would be to vomit up absolutely everything she eats, and she can't even bring herself to stick her fingers down her throat. Also the staff might hear her puking and put her in time-out, and she can't take that chance.

Pam, her eyes feverish with the desire for praise, recites carefully. "Cathcart is a brain disorder. People think they see reflections of people who aren't really there, who may be projects of—"

"Projections of," Dr. Jensen corrects gently.

"Yeah, *projections* of parts of the person's personality. Parts that they, uh, like are rejecting."

Seth looks even more scared. Dr. Jensen says, "Very good, Pam." Seena mimes barfing.

Roth sneers, "It would be even better if she had the slightest idea what any of that means."

"I know what it means!" Pam says. Her face reddens.

"Yeah? What?" Roth gives her the nastiest smile Caitlin has ever seen from him, which is saying something. Roth is a pig, but he's smart. "Explain narcissistic projection to us, Pam."

"That's enough, Roth," Dr. Jensen says.

"Yeah, Crotch, that's enough," Seena says. She's told Caitlin that her goal is to get Roth to blow up in Group so that Hardin will take him down. So far this has not happened.

Roth says to Seena, "Your attempt at wordplay is pathetic beyond belief."

"Better than your crotch play." Just last week, Seena caught Roth masturbating. "Now *that* was pathetic."

"Enough, both of you!" Dr. Jensen says. Seena grins at Caitlin. Roth clenches his fists. He's not as big as Hardin, but his fists remind Caitlin of bananas curled into the fetal position. "Pam, have you seen any of your projections since our last Group?"

"Just the old lady in the hop skirt."

"Hop skirt," Caitlin says, before she can stop herself. Pam's bestial stupidity irritates Caitlin, although she knows it's not poor Pam's fault. Pam is a born butt, dithery and moronic and terrified of pissing off anybody in power. How did Pam ever survive on the streets before she entered the Institute? How did Caitlin? If she *was* on the streets, if that's what really happened. There's so much she can't remember. Since she came here time has folded up on itself like one of those Möbius strips she learned about . . . where?

Dr. Jensen says, "Anybody else see any of their projections? Josh? Sam?"

Josh, who sees his people in standing liquid, saw The Boy Who Talks To Dogs in his breakfast milk. Dr. Jensen's bird-flat eyes sharpen. Caitlin has noticed that some "projections" interest the doctors and therapists more than others. Josh says, "He had this big dog with him, a Bernese Mountain."

"Are you sure of the breed?" Dr. Jensen says.

"Yeah. I remember from . . . before." Josh's handsome face spasms, as it always does when he mentions Before. Sometimes Caitlin thinks she can feel his attempts at recall, reflections of her own vain efforts. Yet some things are perfectly clear. History. Physics. Literature. *"A rose red city, half as old as Time. . ."*

"And what do you think the boy talking to the dog represents?" Dr. Jensen's eyes are less sharp now. *Less invested*, Caitlin thinks.

Josh says doubtfully, "Memories I'm rejecting about dogs?"

"Could be. We'll talk about it in the one-on-one." She smiles at him. Caitlin hates that Josh smiles back. "Anybody else?"

Jasmine, a tiny black girl with the features of a movie star, saw The Pirate in a corner of her room. Roth has seen a few kids on bicycles. Sam shakes his head. He never talks in Group, not a word, although he must say something in one-on-one, or surely Dr. Jensen would ride him harder? Sam is a tall half-Chinese kid, older than the rest, maybe even twenty. Muscles ripple along his arms. There's a look in his black eyes that makes everybody leave him alone, even Roth.

"And our scholar?" Dr. Jensen says. "Caitlin?"

"Nothing," Caitlin says flatly. Seena grins.

"Are you sure, Caitlin?" Dr. Jensen says gently, almost pityingly: *You can be one of us if you just cooperate.*

"I'm sure."

"I saw something," Seena says. "I saw a naked black guy with this incredibly huge—"

"That's enough, Seena!"

"Don't you want to know about my projections, doc? They're a lot better than brown-nose Pam's."

Pam says, "I'm not—"

Seena says, "Sure you are. You give the fucking jailers whatever they want. A clear case of Stockholm Syndrome."

"Stock . . . I thought it was Cathcart Sindom?" Pam says, bewildered, and Roth whoops with laughter.

"God, you're dumber than a bucket of hair!"

Pam starts to cry. Jasmine puts a tentative hand on her arm. Dr. Jensen starts to say something but it's drowned out by Roth, who howls, "Even dumber than Jasmine is dirty!" Jasmine, who does hate to shower although nobody knows why, looks up and her pretty face crumples. And then all at once Sam is flying through the air, landing on Roth with both hands around Roth's fat neck.

People scream. Hardin barrels through the door, tries to pull Sam off Roth, fails. Dr. Jensen yells, "Security!" and pushes buttons on her handheld. Seth crawls behind the sofa. Pam goes on screaming long after everybody else has stopped. Josh takes advantage of the chaos to dash toward the locked front door. Two more orderlies rush in and grab Sam.

Seena rolls on the floor in helpless laughter, her anorectic bones revealing knobs like misaligned gear heads. "Sam is in love with Jasmine! Who knew!"

Caitlin slips out of the room after Josh. She's smiling but she also feels

the need to get away. Another crazy day at the crazy farm, growing wild weeds. Josh has already been collared by Security. In the girls' bathroom, Caitlin gazes into the mirror. She sees a black man dressed in rough brown wool, a ringleted child in a white dress and heavy brown shoes, and the boy in the wired purple garbage bags. He seems to look directly at Caitlin. She scowls at him, and after a moment he shoots her the finger and turns away.

Caitlin sits across from Dr. Covell in one-on-one. He says, "Why won't you admit that you see any of your projections, Caitlin? You're the smartest patient here, by far, and older than the rest except for Sam. You test with an IQ in the genius range, so I know you're intelligent and educated enough to realize that the first step toward getting well is admitting you have a disorder."

He—all of them—always make it sound like some transient condition from outside: *You have a cold, you have the flu, you have a disorder*. Something that can be rooted out with proper medication and bed rest. Caitlin looks away from him. He's fairly young, with dark hair and long thick eyelashes and a great body. Could Dr. Jensen actually be stupid enough to think Caitlin would respond to this man just because he's a hottie? Maybe Dr. Jensen is that stupid . . . never underestimate the stupidity of the desperate.

Desperate. Now why did she think that about Dr. Jensen?

She says, "I don't see any projections."

"Then why do you think you're here, Caitlin?"

"I can't remember why." This is true. *Teen runaways*—that's what they were all told they were. Maybe so, although the term seems far too daring, too adventurous, for what Caitlin knows herself to be.

Dr. Covell says, "What were you wondering about just then?" His eyes scratch at her face.

"I was wondering why there's no TV anywhere here."

"No, you weren't."

"And no windows, either."

"Both bring in more of the outside world than you're ready to deal with," Dr. Covell says.

"Bullshit," Caitlin says, surprising herself.

"I think, Caitlin, you may have been hanging out too much with Seena."

Fright takes Caitlin. They could transfer Seena, as they transferred Michael. Caitlin can't survive in this alien place without Seena.

The weakness of confusion must show on her face because Dr. Covell abruptly attacks. "When you said 'Fuck off' into the mirror this morning, who were you talking to?"

Caitlin stares at him. The bathroom is bugged, maybe even has cameras. Have they watched Caitlin shower, pee, shit? Her face grows hot. But she's proud of her level tone when she says, "I think you may have a civil-rights lawsuit on your hands."

"I said you were intelligent." His tone is admiring. She hates him.

"I'm intelligent enough to know you must have informed all our parents that we're here. How come nobody has visited any of us?"

"We can't locate relatives for anyone in your ward. Your fingerprints aren't on file anywhere and, remember, you couldn't even supply your own names. 'Caitlin' is a name you chose for yourself when you arrived."

This is true. Caitlin has harrowed her brain looking for her real name, her real self, but found nothing. Dr. Covell gazes at her. She senses that he is smarter than Dr. Jensen, and so more dangerous. She leans back in her chair, pretending nonchalance, knowing that he recognizes the pretense. Her heart hammers. "My former name is irrelevant to me."

"And are your projections 'irrelevant,' too?"

"I don't see any projections."

"Then you were talking to yourself in the mirror?"

"Yes. I don't like my looks. I wish I looked like Seena or Jasmine."

For a nanosecond he looks uncertain. What she said could plausibly account for that "Fuck off," to the mirror, since her statement is completely accurate. She'd give anything for Seena's elegant boniness, for Jasmine's petite femininity. Dr. Jensen's plan, if that's what it was, has been turned against itself. *This* man would never underestimate the value of physical beauty.

"You're a pretty young woman," he says with a therapist's combination of prim decorum and professional reassurance.

"Can I go now?"

"Yes." But he suspects that he's been played, she can sense it from his face, and his need to control the situation reasserts itself. He says, "It would just be better if you spent less time with Seena."

She nods, shrugs, leaves. She grips her hands together as tightly as Sam gripped Roth in Group. Seena is her only friend here. Seena, who takes chances on everything, including befriending Caitlin. Caitlin would never have made the first move. And it is Seena who gives her the strength to keep silent about the people in the mirror, to keep at least that for herself in a place where nothing else is private. She cannot lose Seena, too.

The glass window on Dr. Covell's office door reflects Caitlin's face as she leaves. Her face, and the woman with the baby on her hip.

Caitlin awakes in bed, in total blackness, to find a hand over her mouth. Terror swamps her like a long rolling wave, but before she can bite the hand or scream around it, Seena says, "It's me, don't scream! Slide over."

Completely disoriented, Caitlin moves toward the wall and feels Seena's body fit close to hers in the narrow bed. Caitlin whispers, "What happened to the lights?" The Institute is always at least half-lit. "And how did you—"

"Dunno. Maybe some kind of power blackout. I just crawled along out of sight to your room. Come on, we're getting out."

"What?" Now Caitlin can hear people in the hall, calling to each other. Hardin bellows something unintelligible. Even before her door opens, Seena has slid over Caitlin, toward the wall, and dropped soundlessly behind the bed. A flashlight shines into the room and someone says softly, "Caitlin?" She lies still, eyes closed, her breathing as regular as she can make it. The door closes.

"How—"

Seena says, "All the power is off, cameras and e-locks and all their prison shit. Come on." In the blackness she fumbles for Caitlin's hand. Caitlin doesn't move. Seena says, "What the . . . you *want* to stay in here?"

"No." But she's terrified to leave, to act. Still, all she has to do is follow Seena.

She yanks the blankets up over her pillow and rounds them like a body. Seena pulls her along, but not toward the door . . . if the door is indeed where Caitlin thinks it is in the total blackness. Where are they going? The first thing Hardin would do is barricade the door to the ward. All at once she realizes: the closet. It's no more than a doorless alcove with a clothes pole but no hangers—can't give mental patients anywhere to hide or anything to hurt themselves with—but in the ceiling is a panel with an e-lock.

She whispers to Seena, "Don't try to climb on the clothes pole. It's not strong enough."

"I know. Get down on all fours. Quick!"

Seena climbs on Caitlin's back. Despite Seena's height, she can't weigh more than ninety pounds. Wood creaks faintly as she pushes open the panel. Caitlin thinks, *She'll get up there but I can never do it.* . . . She is too heavy, too stiff. Seena climbs down and whispers, "It's open. Stand on me and go up."

"But I—"

"Just the fuck do it!"

Caitlin feels with her foot for Seena's bony back. Under her bare toes it feels like walking on sharp pebbles. Her hands grope wildly for the edge of the opening in the ceiling. She finds it, but there's no way she can haul herself that far upwards. . . .

"I'm here," a voice says softly from above. Josh.

For a second she's so dizzy that she actually thinks she might fall. Then his groping hands find hers and pull. Caitlin gives a little jump on Seena's back—oh, God, what if she *breaks* it?—and Josh hauls her over the edge like a beached whale. He shoves her aside and reaches down for Seena, so much lighter, so much fitter. . . . Caitlin feels Seena land beside her and hears the panel close.

She can smell Josh, a masculine odor that sends blood rushing into her face. She's never been so close to him. Her most fervent hope is that he never figured out how often she dreamed of this, never saw her eyes tracking his every gesture, never caught the longing she tried with every tendon to hide from him. You had to hide love. If you didn't, you opened yourself up to terrible humiliation. Caitlin doesn't know how she knows this, but she does.

A small light blooms, and Seena says admiringly, "Where the fuck did you get *that*?"

"Stole it." A flashlight, sending a single swaying beam as Josh swings it, like a pale yellow crayon stroke across the cramped world.

They are jammed together in some sort of horizontal service shaft made of plastic lattice. As the beam strikes her, Caitlin shrinks inside her blue cotton pajamas. Seena wears a red T-shirt and skimpy black panties,

Josh a white tee and boxer shorts incongruously printed with golf clubs. Caitlin's glad when they crawl ahead of her. All she has to do is follow.

To where?

The other two don't know, couldn't ever have seen these plastic passages before, either. But evidently Josh, in the lead, has a good sense of direction because he crawls quickly, decisively. "Keep up!" Seena hisses over her shoulder, and Caitlin does her best.

The passage ends in a wall of insulation and vertical beams, with another panel beneath them. Josh opens it, swings his mini-light around, and drops through with a thud that makes Caitlin gasp. But no one comes. Seena follows Josh. "Caitlin! Jump!"

It's maybe eight feet down to what looks like the narrow landing of a staircase. She'll tumble down the stairs, break something, make an ass of herself. . . .

"I'll catch you!" Josh says, and Caitlin slides clumsily over the edge. His arms break her fall, hold her as she steadies. It seems to Caitlin that he holds her longer than necessary. A lance of . . . something shoots through Caitlin's body, all the way from just behind her eyes to her knees, which turn watery. But Seena is already tugging her down the dark stairwell.

Voices sound somewhere above. How many floors are there to the Institute? Which one have they been on?

The second, apparently, because one floor down Josh's light shines on red lettering: EMERGENCY EXIT. ALARM WILL SOUND. "Not today, it won't," Seena says and reaches for the door handle.

"Wait!" Caitlin says. "It's winter out there!"

Josh says, "It's winter?"

"I asked Dr. Jensen. And this is *Manhattan*." Winter in New York means cold and snow, and the three of them are wearing almost nothing.

"Fuck that," Seena says. "I'd rather freeze than—" The lights go back on.

Immediately alarms begin to sound. Seena hurls herself at the door, which adds one more alarm to the clamor. They run through—and stop dead.

"What . . ." Josh. He falls silent.

They huddle outside a brick-and-steel building, facing a jungle. Enveloped in it, almost engulfed by it, even with the solid building behind them. Vines thick as a man's body twist from trees soaring above them, and from the vines shoot out smaller vines interlaced, thick with strange green leaves pulpy as soft fruit. The heat forms a second medium of its own, a dense humid pool thick as water, and the smell . . .

Footsteps pound down the staircase beyond the open door behind them. "Come on!" Seena cries and plunges into a hole in the dense jungle. Caitlin hangs back until Josh grabs her hand, and then something that isn't reason or logic or even choice takes her, and she lets him push her after Seena, crawling as if her life depends on it, and the thought comes to her, finally, that maybe it does.

In just a few minutes they're past being located by anyone brave enough or stupid enough to follow. They squeeze through *this* small opening instead of *that* one a dozen times; each opening swishes softly closed

behind them. In some places Caitlin crawls over real grass, but the grass seems dead. Noise ceases the deeper they go, except for their own breathing. Dim green light suffuses everything from above, no brighter than Josh's flashlight but uniform. The smell is neither good nor bad but very strong, the musky odor of something like mushrooms, underlaid with a sharp, not unpleasant spice that tingles in her upper nose.

"Okay, stop," Seena pants. "They can't . . . get us . . . here."

Caitlin puts her head between her knees. They crouch in a sort of small clearing, except it isn't "clear." Vines blot out the sky, twine across the jungle floor, sway all around them. It's like being inside a writhing ball of yarn.

"What is this?" Josh says, and, at the question, Caitlin feels her mind steady. She clings desperately to logic as the only thing she recognizes about herself, or the situation. What have they done? The Institute was at least safe, at least known. While *this* . . .

"It's supposed to be February," she says rapidly. "This isn't February in Manhattan. So either this isn't Manhattan or it is and . . . and something happened. When we were taken."

The word surprises her: *taken*. Yet that seems right, and all at once Caitlin has an image of herself in a deep cellar, a room with no windows and shelves lined with jars and a fruity smell like jam . . . the image vanishes.

Josh and Seena stare at her, but not with complete incomprehension.

Seena says slowly, "I remember being . . . taken. Some of it, anyway." Her voice speeds up, vomiting out the words as if it were breakfast. "I was gaining weight at the Institute and I hate that so I stopped eating and they made me, so I puked it up and that's when my memories started to return. It's like they put something in the food to *make us forget!*"

"As part of the treatment for Cathcart Syndrome?" Josh says.

"There is no Cathcart! There never was! Ask Caitlin! She's the smart one!"

Josh turns to her. "You never see any projections?"

Caitlin is suddenly aware of danger: She might get Josh angry at her. She might damage the improbable bond between her and Seena, based solely on their agreement about the so-called "Cathcart Syndrome." Worst, she might have to be honest, which always made you too vulnerable, almost as vulnerable as love. She can't take that chance.

But . . . Josh's green eyes reflect all the green around them. The vine-jungle is so soft, so thornless, that nothing ripped his tee, but in places soft green pulp smears it, looking like guacamole. His blond hair falls over his forehead, which glistens with sweat from the incredible heat. His clothes cling to his gorgeous body. He gazes directly into her eyes.

"I see projections," she says slowly. "I just told the doctors I didn't."

"Why?" He sounds genuinely puzzled, and the wave of reluctance in Caitlin's mind crests into a tsunami. If they are all runaways, why should Josh trust the authorities at the Institute so much? Why would he be so puzzled that Caitlin doesn't?

She says, "I didn't tell Dr. Jensen because I wasn't really sure. I only ever saw my . . . my projections just after I woke up, and I thought they might just be dreams. I'm still not sure."

He gazes at her steadily. They both know she is lying.

Seena says peevishly, "Isn't anybody interested in what *I* just remembered?"

"Of course we are." Caitlin turns to her in relief.

"Okay. I was living in this little city in Virginia, Suwaquahua, and sleeping in a, like, abandoned tunnel or something near the highway. It was a good squat. Then I was woke up by this flash of light and I thought—fuck me, I really did—that somebody dropped a bomb. And I thought, 'Okay, this is me, dying in a nuclear blast, big deal,' and then I started to cry—"

Caitlin tries to picture Seena in tears, and fails. Seena—tough, bony Seena, with that edge that Caitlin envies and covets, the edge that lets you take risks and damn the consequences—Seena, crying in a tunnel either because she was going to die or because she wasn't. And Seena now, sitting cross-legged in this impossible jungle, her red tee a spot of color among the green and her bikini panties negligently exposing as much as they covered, bringing out the memory as if it were just another day of Group, of one-on-one, of in-facility school and bells for bedtime.

"I crawled out of the tunnel an hour after the big light. Maybe longer, I dunno. And everybody was *gone*. Almost everybody. I saw somebody a block away in front of the bakery, but he saw me and just ran. So I run around going, 'What the fuck! What the fuck!' and then the buildings, they . . . they . . ."

"What?" Josh says. His eyes are now fastened on Seena, and Caitlin feels jealousy uncoil in her stomach.

"The buildings start to crumble. Yeah, crumble into some sort of powder but not all at once, just getting softer at first and flaking off like dan-druff. So I run into this open area full of weeds and broken glass and shit, and I stay there where nothing can fall on me and watch Suwaquahua just . . . just . . ."

Josh puts his hand on Seena's arm. She shakes it off and glares at him. He says, "Sorry. Go on."

She shrugs, once more the Seena that Caitlin knows. "Ain't any more 'on.' I stayed there until the city was gone and the sky was full of planes and helicopters and fuck-all, and goons in hazmat suits picked me up. And then the assholes at the Institute made me forget all of it."

Caitlin considers Seena's story. A whole city that just crumbled away . . . some sort of advanced terrorist weapon? Is that even possible?

None of this is possible.

Josh says to Seena, "And your projections? You always made up stuff, nothing real."

Seena's glare deepens. "Why the fuck do you care about my projections?"

Josh smacks one fist into his other hand, a gesture so violent that Caitlin jumps, backing into a thick, looping vine. Josh shouts, "We have to survive out here or go back—don't you get that? Any information at all might help! How the fuck do I know what information we need to understand this mess?"

"Okay, okay, don't come in your shorts! Jeez! I see the same four people,

that's all. An old lady in a rocking chair, two kids dressed real old-timey, and a man carrying a shovel. He's dressed like some dumb history play, too. Now tell me how that's going to help us!"

"I don't know," Josh says. "Like I said, I don't know what will help. But we need to figure this thing out. I told in Group what my projections are. Caitlin?"

His green eyes gaze at her, but not angry as they were with Seena. Josh is gentle again, his face beseeching. Something turns over in Caitlin's chest.

He takes her hand.

Danger.

She says, "I only saw my projections once, just as I woke up, and I think they were just dreams."

"What dreams?"

"How can dreams help us?"

"We don't know that yet." Still gentle but still just out of reach, tantalizing her. Suddenly Caitlin is angry. He is just one more of the million things in the universe that she can never have.

She says, "Only two people, a boy in jeans and sweatshirt and a woman with a baby. Maybe the woman was my mother."

Josh drops her hand.

He says, "We're either still in Manhattan or we're not, so—"

Seena interrupts him with "No way this is Manhattan!"

Josh doesn't answer and Caitlin sees the moment that Seena gets it. Seena says, "You mean this is what Manhattan turned into, that it got nuked just like Suwaquahua."

"We don't know," Josh says.

Caitlin doesn't think there had been any nuke, but she keeps quiet, having nothing better to offer. Despite the heat, her hand that Josh dropped feels cold. He says, "I think our best bet is just to crawl in a straight line until we get out of whatever this jungle is. To someplace that isn't jungle."

Seena says, "How are we gonna keep to a straight line?"

Josh shows them the tiny compass set into the head of his flashlight.

Seena shrugs. "Okay. I guess it's a chance."

For what? Caitlin thinks but doesn't say. She wants to be back inside the Institute. She wants Josh to hold her hand again. She wants this day to begin over. "*Call back yesterday, bid time return. . .*"

She follows Seena into the jungle.

Hours later, hours of crawling under vines, climbing over vines, pushing aside vines, exhausts all of them. They escaped from the Institute after dawn but before breakfast, and by now it must be late afternoon. Caitlin's stomach rumbles with hunger.

"Too bad that gizmo of yours doesn't have a machete, too," Seena mutters. "We're resting now, macho man." In two minutes she's asleep.

Eventually Josh sleeps, too. Caitlin hears him snore, surprisingly deep and loud. She can't sleep. Every muscle aches. She lies on her back, looking up at the layers and layers of vines and branches and soft pulpy

leaves, and all at once she wonders why they haven't just climbed as high as they can to see how far the jungle extends. Why hadn't Josh suggested that?

Why didn't she?

Seena moans in her sleep. Josh snores louder, flat on his back. Then rain starts, pattering softly on vegetation, and Caitlin sits up. She rolls a leaf into a cup, waits for it to collect several dozen drops, and drinks. The leaf unrolls. On its wet, glistening surface, Caitlin sees the man.

Only it's not a man. It's . . . something else.

She bites her tongue to keep from crying out. The image, wavery and green from the leaf behind, is the head and bust of a pale creature with two eyes, no nose, and a siphon where a mouth should be. The head rises to a single horn like a rhinoceros, but the eyes are not those of a beast. Large, pink, with dark pupils flecked with green.

Fingers trembling, Caitlin shreds the leaf. The rain keeps falling. She closes her eyes, picks another, and holds it so it will coat with water.

This time the image is more blurry, a smear of green-tinged color, but by turning the leaf this way and that she can make it out: the man in eighteenth-century knee breeches and silver brocade waistcoat. He's partly turned away from Caitlin and she can't see his expression. She blinks to focus her vision, and when she opens her eyes again, Josh is staring at her.

"This leaf," she says, holding it out to him, "do you think it's edible? I'm so hungry."

"Don't risk it," he says softly. "We don't know if it's poison. Caitlin, come with me . . . please?"

He's up and worming his way through the vines. Caitlin follows; she can't help herself. No more than ten steps and the thick curtain of vines hides Seena. Josh stops in another clearing, much smaller than the first, and sits. There's barely room to fit both of them. He says, "I've been thinking about what Seena told us."

"Yeah?" She can smell his sweat, his hair. She feels dizzy.

"What if we aren't in Manhattan but they brought us to Suwaquahua . . . to what Suwaquahua became after the people mostly vanished and the buildings crumbled and this bloom started."

Bloom. The word makes Caitlin think of roses in a June garden. But Josh means something else, more like deadly algae on the ocean. She says, "Why would the government put a mental institution for kids right in the middle of the bloom?"

"I don't know."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I guess not. Nothing makes sense. Caitlin . . . I don't want to die."

She doesn't want to die either, but says nothing.

"I especially don't want to die a virgin."

She goes still. More still—she thought she was motionless before but this is something much different, a halt in time itself, a caesura in the universe. Rain, filtered through leaves and vines and spiced air, patters on her bowed head.

Josh reaches for her.

Gently he pushes her onto her back, undoes the buttons on her soggy pajama top. Caitlin closes her eyes. If she looks at him, she will shatter. If she stays quiet, she will shatter. So she whispers, "Seena . . . she's so beautiful. . . ."

"It's you I want. Oh, Caitlin . . ."

He slides down her pajama bottoms, wads them beneath her ass. His fingers touch and probe her but very gently, and for a long time, until she feels warmth and wetness where they have never been before. When he slides into her, there is only a brief second of pain and then pleasure again. Later, after he's finished, he doesn't stop touching her until the pleasure crests and Caitlin cries out, clinging to him, tears flowing from her still closed eyes.

She can't believe this is happening. Not to her.

He cradles her as they lie together. She wishes he would tell her . . . what? About himself, how someone who looks like him could still be a virgin, how he knew to . . . but Josh's mind is still on the bloom. He says drowsily, "If this is Suwaquahua . . . if Cathcart Syndrome . . . God, I wish I had more information. For instance, why you don't see any projections at all, sweet Caitlin?"

"I don't know."

"You really really don't?"

"No." She doesn't want to talk about this. She wants him to say he's in love with her, or at least that he liked sex with her. Instead, he falls asleep again.

Well, she's read that men do that after making love. *Making love*—the phrase seems so adult, so much something she never thought would be connected with her. She wants him to want her again. She wants to please him and is terrified that she won't, that he won't continue to want her. She will do anything to keep his arms around her, anything.

"Josh," she whispers, "I think I took AP science courses. I remember a lot of physics."

He doesn't stir. When he wakes, she will tell him. About her projections, about spacetime, about the theory that has been growing in her mind. She and Josh and Seena might die here, and this is all she has to give. In the rainy green light, even his profile is beautiful, sharp and strong as a Roman statue, an Egyptian god.

Caitlin knows she's being sentimental but she doesn't care.

Ten steps away, Seena screams.

By the time they reach her, Seena has gone rigid on the jungle floor. Her eyes are wide open, staring upward. Her body looks like concrete. Josh, who got there first because Caitlin took seconds to put her pajamas back on and all he had to do was pull up his shorts, kneels between Seena and Caitlin. He is shining his miniature flashlight inside her mouth. "Got to keep her from swallowing her tongue!"

It doesn't look to Caitlin as if Seena could ever swallow anything again. But after a few moments Seena's body relaxes. Josh withdraws the flashlight. Seena moans, twitches, opens her eyes.

"You're okay now," Josh says. He stands.

Seena scowls. "Now? What happened?"

Caitlin says, "You had a fit."

"I don't have fucking fits!" Seena is furious at the mere suggestion. She gets to her feet, glaring at them both. Darkness starts to gather.

"It's okay," Josh says soothingly. "Maybe you just cried out in your sleep."

"I don't do that either, asshole!"

"Yeah, I know. You're one tough chick." He says it so comically, in such mock terror, that reluctantly Seena laughs.

"I am. And don't you forget it."

"No chance. So what do we do now, tough chick? Your call."

Seena considers. The greenish light is almost gone. "Can't do anything until tomorrow, except sleep some more. Shit, I'm so hungry. Caitie, you okay?"

"Yes," Caitlin says. She wants to sleep beside Josh, their hands touching, their thighs pressed together. But he says "Bathroom break," and vanishes into the bloom.

Seena grumbles, "How can he piss when he hasn't drunk anything? God, I *am* tired. Still."

She lies down. So does Caitlin. When Josh returns, he curls up as far from both of them as he can get in the little clearing, and Caitlin lies in the total, impenetrable dark feeling her heart split along its seam.

It is hours, years, eons before she can sleep.

Josh and Seena are gone.

The jungle is still dark and silent. No insects, no birds. Time stretches like taffy. But eventually Caitlin sees the thin beam of light, hears them creep back into the clearing. Josh whispers something, unintelligible. Seena gives a muffled laugh. Her voice is louder than his: "... terrific in the sack, Josh."

Caitlin says, "I'm awake."

They both pause.

Caitlin says clearly, "Seena, what happened when you were first taken to the Institute?"

Seena says, "*What?*"

"You heard me. When you were first taken to the Institute, where were you and what did you see?"

"Caitie, what's wrong with you, girl? You know none of us remember that shit!"

Caitlin looks at Josh. "It was in the flashlight, wasn't it? The flashlight you just happened to have when there just happened to be a black-out. The flashlight with a compass and enough of that drug to keep the patients from recalling too much, because they go catatonic when they do, right? Like Seena did, like all those ones you doctors lost when you first started messing with our so-called 'projections'—"

"He's no doctor, he's a patient like us!" Seena says. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"He's no patient," Caitlin says. "But you're right, he's no doctor either." She feels almost like two people, one watching the other with astonishment, eyeing this Caitlin who can talk in such a dead-quiet voice even as

her guts collapse in her belly. "What are you, Josh? An actor, a pro? Playing the role of a patient, and willing to do anything for a certain kind of information. Including sex with both of us." Caitlin might have been a virgin, but she read books. Josh's control, his intimate knowledge of how to make a girl ready. . . .

Seena makes a strangled noise.

"Why is it so important that Seena and I tell you our projections? What do you suspect we see that you haven't been able to get out of Roth, or poor stupid Pam, or Seth, or any of the others rotting away someplace before you found a drug that blocked memory?"

"Caitlin," Josh says, and then all at once his voice changes. He stops shining the flashlight on Caitlin and switches it off. She can still see his outline, gray against gray-green; dawn is beginning. "You're a smart girl, aren't you? All right, yes. They were walking a very narrow line here between losing you survivors and getting information out of you. Your minds somehow got altered when the bloom happened and nobody knows how. Too much memory and you collapse. Too little and they couldn't learn anything. It was a—"

"So you convince us we're all mentally ill and destroy us that way? In the name of science?"

"In the name of—"

Seena suddenly shrieks, "I'm nobody's lab rat!" and launches herself at Josh.

He's not expecting it; he was focused on Caitlin. Seena knees him in the balls and he shouts in pain. Her nails rake his face, and then she points two fingers and goes for his eyes.

Caitlin deflects her barely in time. Caitlin doesn't even think first; she just launches herself at Seena and her greater weight takes them both down, crashing into the wall of soft swaying vines. Josh is doubled over in pain. Seena scrambles off the ground before Caitlin can recover from the fall. She dives at Josh again.

All Caitlin has—all she has ever had—are her words, her mind. She says quickly, "I know what the jungle is, Seena! I know how to save ourselves!"

It works. Seena slows, glances back, kicks Josh once in the stomach, and turns toward Caitlin. "How?"

"Not in front of him."

Seena nods. She jerks Caitlin upright—how can that skinny starved body be so strong?—and half-drags her away from Josh, bleeding and gasping on the ground. Caitlin says, "Will he—"

"He'll live, the asshole. Come on!"

Caitlin snatches up Josh's flashlight and lets Seena lead her on. The light brightens; the jungle seems less dense here, or at least walking is easier. Something glints through the trees, disappears, glints again. Abruptly they emerge on the banks of a river, vines trailing in the water and crowding a tiny island a hundred yards from shore, an island that is mostly exposed rock rising in three regularly spaced humps.

Seena gasps, "I know this place! That's Carson Island, this is where the Blackwater hits Suwaquahua Creek—we're in *Suwaquahua*! But where's

the factory? Mallory's? The Old Blue? They're all gone—what the fuck happened here?"

She doesn't remember what she told Josh and Caitlin earlier, before Josh re-medicated her. But she will remember, and so will Caitlin, and then—how much time do they have? Time—it's all about time.

Caitlin goes still. She can't do this.

Yes. She can. She has to.

"Come on, Seena. Down to the river."

"What the fuck—"

"Just do it!"

The river is still and gray, a dawn mirror. Caitlin lowers herself to the very edge and peers down. Different people are there, people she hasn't seen before, wandering in and out of the gray mist: black men in nothing but rough brown loin cloths, men in red or green British regimentals, an Indian in deerskin, one woman in a white muslin hoop skirt and another in a fringed knee-length dress with long ropes of beads. That one, laughing, waves a cigarette holder. Her lips are painted scarlet. She steps daintily away from the river, as if onto a dock, in her high heels.

"Seena, what do you see in the river?"

"Have you gone —"

"What? Tell me!"

"Nothing. No fish, no garbage, nothing. Just water."

"Where did you see your people? Not the ones you made up for Jensen and Covell—the real ones?"

Seena squats beside her. Her tone is unexpectedly gentle. "You've flipped out, you know that?"

Caitlin hauls her gaze away from the river just as the boy in purple garbage bags shows up. She grasps Seena's bony wrist. "Please, Seena, it's important. Who did you see and where did you see them?"

Seena looks away, says, "Only in other people's eyes. The old lady in the rocking chair, the two kids dressed mega-retro, the guy with the shovel. And a few dudes in even weirder stuff . . . why?"

"Dudes in weirder stuff? Like purple garbage bags with lighted wires?"

"Yeah—how did you *know*?"

"Look in my eyes now. Tell me what you see."

Seena clearly does not want to do this. But she doesn't pull her wrist away from Caitlin, and after a moment she leans close. She smells of sweat, sex, and the spicy mold of this new jungle.

"Oh my God!" Seena jerks away so fast she nearly tumbles into the river. The boy in purple garbage bags looks up, annoyed. And behind him, materializing from the mist, is what Caitlin knows Seena has just seen in Caitlin's eyes: the jungle-pale creature with pink eyes, no nose, and a horn on its head.

"What's *that*?" Seena demands. "Caitie . . ."

"I think it's part of this jungle. Or will be." She can hardly believe she is saying this.

"Make sense!" Seena, who always becomes angry when she's frightened, is getting furious now. Caitlin doesn't want that anger turned against her. Seena's hands are balled into spiny fists.

"I think we see the past, Seena. Ever since the . . . since Before ended. That's why all the hoop skirts and slaves and British soldiers and 1940's dress and all of it. Whatever destroyed the human city also changed the minds of everybody left alive, everybody underground at the time—it changed the electrical field or something. . . ." This sounds totally inadequate, but Caitlin has no time to relate to Seena her analogy of consciousness folding and warping, the way spacetime folds and warps in physics. "Anyway, we see the past that lived on this spot. This place was probably a river town for a long time."

"You're full of shit! That's impossible!"

"In physics I once learned . . . no, please, Seena, don't go, just listen to me for a minute . . . spacetime is like a loaf of bread." At the mere mention of bread Caitlin's stomach growls, but at least Seena is listening. The river shines silvery as the sun rises.

"You can think of each minute as we experience it like a slice of bread. Everything that happens at, say, six in the morning on February 10 is on one slice. But the whole loaf is there all the time, past and present and future. Now imagine slicing the loaf at an angle." Caitlin illustrates this with gestures in the air. Her stomach growls again. "The slices are all different. Our six in the morning on February 10 is on the same slice as, maybe, 1784 or 1942."

Seena says suddenly, "Suwaquahua was founded in 1787."

Caitlin hadn't expected Seena to know anything like that. "Yeah. And Mr. Armstead—" the name jumps out of nowhere into her mind—"my physics teacher, he said there might be other dimensions, too, and time might run even more different there."

"So I'm seeing people from other times and other *dimensions* just fucking popping up in your eyes? Get real, Caitlin!"

"Well, you come up with a better explanation!" Caitlin shouts.

"I can't! Shit . . ." Seena sinks onto the riverbank. "What if you're right? Then what's that thing I just saw?"

"I don't know."

"But what do you *think* it is? You're the brain, I'm just a dumb ho that—"

"No, you're not." All at once Caitlin starts to cry. It's too much, and she's so scared, and hunger gnaws at her insides like a rat. She unscrews the end of Josh's flashlight to see the tiny flask of yellow powder. That's all that kept Seena from going catatonic when she remembered Suwaquahua crumbling into powder. And memory was now returning to them both. How much powder to keep their minds here, in the present? And how long would the flask last?

"Stop crying," Seena says, "or I'll pound you to jelly. I mean it."

She does mean it. Caitlin checks her sobs. The sun rises above the far end of the river.

"So aliens are slicing our bread differently," Seena says. Her voice has the high, rapid breathiness of someone fighting panic. "And after they did this jungle-shit to Suwaquahua, we can see that. Shit, that's why we were in the Institute . . . the government wants to know what we see and why we see it. To figure out the future. But why not just ask us? Why the drugs and 'Cathcart Syndrome' and all those lies?"

"I don't know," Caitlin says.

"I know. Because the doctors are shithead assholes." This answer satisfies Seena, who moves on to her next anger. "But the aliens—why did they do it? Why wreck Suwaquahua and make this creepy jungle? No, don't tell me—they want to live here themselves. This is their idea of, say, a luxury condo, and the hell with humans. Hey!" she suddenly screams at the top of her voice, "Hey, shitheads, we were here first! It's our place! Ours!"

"Not like that," Caitlin says, and gets to her feet. All at once she understands, and gasps aloud. "*Not like that.*"

"Not like what? Caitlin, what are you—"

"They don't *know*."

Caitlin wades into the river. For a moment she thinks her legs won't hold up, but they *have to*, just as she has to finally take the risk of action instead of thought. The water is warm as a bathtub. Ripples move away from her in concentric circles but they settle as she stands very still, waist deep. Overhead, a helicopter drones into view.

Seena says, "They're looking for us!"

More likely, Caitlin realizes, belatedly, they're responding to some sort of tracker on Josh's flashlight. But she has no time for that.

"*The time has come, the walrus said, to talk of many things—*"

As the water returns to glassy smoothness, the people reappear. There are a surprising number of them to have ever stood in or on three feet of water; maybe the river has shifted over time. Caitlin ignores them, as they once ignored her, until the alien form again appears out of the mist. She fixes her gaze on it, says, "I'm here. I'm here. I'm *here*."

Nothing.

She gazes harder, silent now but bending her mind forward, concentrating it on that one spot in the water, that one point on a slice of time that includes both her and this strange creature who wants her planet.

No response.

"Seena, get in here and look in my eyes!"

Seena does. Something about Caitlin has compelled her, although Caitlin cannot imagine what. She has never been compelling. But here Seena is, and after the water settles she squats down to look up into Caitlin's eyes as Caitlin looks down into the water. Now there are two of them taking action.

Seena makes a soft noise, undecipherable.

I'm here, I'm here, I'm here. . . .

Slowly the creature mirrored in the river turns its head. Its eyes move in some strange way, and the horn on its head waves in some unknowable pattern, and then it is standing on the river bank not five feet from them and Caitlin can feel its astonishment as if it were her own.

I'm here.

We didn't know.

No, not that, because there were no words. But Caitlin feels it, even as she feels her body start to go rigid and her mind slide away from her. She fumbles for Josh's flashlight but it's gone, maybe dropped into the river. But that's okay. The creature does something and there are more of them

on the bank. Something is lifting Caitlin and pulling her gently, invisibly, to the shore. The helicopter sounds closer. Seena is thrashing in the river, screaming, "Caitlin! Caitlin!"

But she is not Caitlin. Her name is Amanda, and she was visiting aunt Jane in Suwaquahua when—but none of that matters. Amanda knows she will be all right. She knows because nothing is what she thought, not Josh nor herself nor the future. But there will be humans in the future, in Suwaquahua, because nobody in the past or present dresses in purple garbage bags wired with tiny lights. That boy will stand on this place one day, alongside whoever else will be/is/was there, alien or human. And with them will be/was/is Amanda, because that bad-tempered boy in purple has—except for his artificially blue eyes—her face, her gestures, her lank hair the same color as Amanda's when she was his age. Son, grandson, clone . . . it doesn't matter. He will stand on the banks of the Suwaquahua along with—

"Time heals all wounds . . ."

—the aliens who have remade it, and—

"Hot time in the old town tonight. . ."

—so will she, because she saw it in the mirror, timeless, the same place she saw the image of Caitlin/Amanda. Herself, who can do whatever she has to. ○

FIREFLIES

flashing in a summer field against twilight sky-dark. Drifting shifting sparkle flashes, ever-changing patterns of writing in some unknowable language of streaks and flashes, constellations blinking on and off. Fireflies dance below us, fireflies behind us, fireflies above us; their silent mating calls a symphony of light. A million flashes a minute, we are immersed in a sea of flickering light.

Just so, the immortals look out across the universe, as stars and galaxies flick into life
fade into dark.

—Geoffrey A. Landis



SURPRISE PARTY

James Patrick Kelly

This issue marks two milestones for frequent contributor James Patrick Kelly. "Surprise Party" is his twenty-fifth June story and his column "Son of Gallimaufry" comes on the tenth anniversary of the start of his "On The Net" column. Jim has a new short story collection coming out in August from Golden Gryphon Press. *The Wreck of the Godspeed* will include his five most recent June stories.

When Mercedes Nunez woke up on the morning of her fifty-first birthday, there was a man in her head. At least she thought it was a man; his beam barely tickled her neurons. Her mindedness of him was as vague as that of some blurry loser in the back row of her high school class picture. Was this an underage fanboy with a taste for fallen celebs? A sleep-deprived college kid writing a paper on the pioneers of neutrality? No—Mercedes's fan base had been skewing geriatric. So, some fossil too feeble to spark enough mindedness to make her blink. He probably remembered her from when she'd been a randy glamgirl pumping neuros onto main menus. That was before her audience passed her by. Before Rake died.

How long had it been since she'd had a beamer? Years. She wasn't sure she wanted one now. She would certainly spend the fee, if it came to that. But at her age she didn't need the hassle of editing her perceptions on the fly. She was used to being all by herself in her head. So she parked him in a blind before she pulled back the covers of her bed. Maybe he'd just signed on for a quick peep show.

Mercedes still slept naked; she only wore anything in bed when she was having sex. How long had it been since she'd had sex? Too long. Mercedes had never really been into porn, although pointy men with thin lips had accused her of it. But in her glory days, she refused to park the beamers when the lights went out. Dai-rinin, her agent, claimed that she had hundreds of them in her head back when she was sleeping with Rake and Kai Lingyu and John Dark and the other stars who had brought neutrality to the masses. John Dark used to tease that she was turned on by the idea of all those beamers watching while he licked her nipples. But he was wrong.

Part of her felt dirty having them in bed with her and part of her was getting back at her mother for being a slut and yes, part of her liked shocking her audience with her carnality, but the biggest part of her was gloating over what a brave and brilliant career move it was to have public sex in mindspace. She laughed at the memory as she stepped into her slippers, wrapped herself in a robe and scuffed into the bathroom. She had been a girl of many parts. Too bad none of them had quite fit together.

Mercedes took a very hot shower, brushed her wet hair flat and sprayed on a face that made her look twenty years younger. For her beamer; ordinarily she wouldn't have bothered. She slipped into her bra and panties before she let him out of the blind. At first she thought that he might have given up on her, but if she concentrated, she could pick out his pale beam from the dazzle of her thoughts.

She posed in front of the mirror, knowing that he would be watching through her eyes. =Enjoy the view.= she thought at him. Mercedes could recognize her younger self in the reflection. Was her belly still taut? It was, and she still had the indoor pallor that made cubicle rats drool. Neutrality appealed most of all to people with lives lit by wallscreens and fluorescents. The cosmetic spray had filled in her wrinkles nicely.

=Like what you see?= She turned, gave her ass a slap and leered into the mirror. =Oh, I forgot. You can't think back at me.= She liked taunting beamers with questions they couldn't answer. They had no way to communicate with her in mindspace and were forbidden by the DayScan contract from contacting her in meatspace. =Know what they used to call people who couldn't speak?= At first, insults had helped relieve her unease at having strangers in her head. =Dumb.= She imagined them shouting back at her in frustration. She found out later that many beamers actually liked having their celeb acknowledge their existence.

"Sorry to disappoint you," she said aloud, accepting a black clingy from the copier in her closet, "but if you want full frontal, you'll have to stick around for the evening show." She draped it over her shoulders and it slithered onto her, cutting a demure boat neckline and hemming its skirt just below the knees. =Let's go,= she thought. =We've got things to do.=

There were six messages twinkling on the wall in her living room. She went through them while she crunched on an English muffin and sipped her first cup of neutriceutical coffee. There was a birthday greeting from her younger sister, Laia, who sent vids of Mercedes's niece and nephew. Rafael loved his famous auntie. When was she coming to visit? Luisana peered into the camera and emitted a sound that might have been Say-say or just baby burbling. They were cute, no doubt about that. But did Mercedes miss having kids? Not really. Besides, who would have been the father? Rake had been too sick, Kai too busy, and John Dark too damn promiscuous. The feeds said Dark was with Zoe Zanzibar these days. Or was it Kim Barbour? But just because she still followed his antics didn't mean she missed him. There was bad news again from the stockbroker. Mercedes had never figured out Rake's portfolio and had managed it badly since he'd died. If her luck didn't change, she'd be broke before she turned sixty. Ricky Morgan from the library said that the book she want-

ed was in and if she picked it up around noonish, maybe they could do lunch at Copper? She told Dai-rinin to send a yes and put a smile on it. Someone named Deddy Suryochondro from Surabaya, Indonesia, wanted to remake *Finger in the Sky* as a worldscape. Mercedes thought worldsapes were plotless and boring but asked Dai-rinin to find out how much Mr. Suryochondro was offering. The last was from Coco Akita, who said that her housebot was in the shop and that she'd be a little late for the lunch at Copper and that Mercedes should save her a seat. She frowned. Save a seat? When had she made plans with Coco?

Then she remembered what day it was.

She groaned, realizing that she was about to be run down by a surprise party. Coco was just scattered enough to have forgotten that lunch was supposed to be a secret. No doubt her friends meant well, but why couldn't they just accept that, after a certain age, some people needed to mourn birthdays, not celebrate them?

She swung her legs onto the couch, settled back into a nest of pillows and waited for the chemicals in the coffee to set fire to her nervous system. Fifty-one wasn't old, was it? She used to think it was. She'd been just twenty-six when she'd turned the storyboard for *Finger in the Sky* over to Kai. And her mother had been forty-eight. Forty-nine? Always grumbling about how the day would come when Mercedes would understand about the whole maiden, mother, crone thing. Well, Mercedes had only been a maiden for about a minute and a half in her teens and she'd never been a mother at all and so why the hell would she bother to worry about the coming of cronedom? She wasn't supposed to die until she was ninety-nine, according to her life clock, and if she gave up bourbon like she kept promising herself she might live even longer. Mimi Burgess down the street was a hundred and ten. The feeds claimed that old Ray Kurzweil was pushing a hundred and thirty. Mercedes was barely middle-aged, too young to mope around on a couch at eight-thirty in the morning. She had a neuro to write. She had a beamer paying to spend time in her head.

It wasn't much of a life, but it was all hers.

The studio was in a shed that had held farm equipment back when Rake's great-great-greats had worked the land. It had been tacked onto the main house but there was no direct entry; she had to cross the back porch to get to its only door. Some days that was as much fresh air as she could stand. She shut the office door and sighed at the impression of Mick Raven shimmering on the wall. He was about to swing his leg off his bicycle as he eyed the Stallworth mansion. What was he going to find there? She wished she knew.

Opposite the wallscreen were floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with paper books—upright, vertical, slantwise, and misfiled in every possible way. In the middle of the room facing the wallscreen was a vintage A-dec 500 dentist's chair done in paprika vinyl. The matching hygienist's cart next to it now housed the cognizor where her agent lived. There was a cup with a sludge of day-old coffee on the tray atop the cart. She trashed it and set the cup she'd just brewed in its place. Around the dentist's chair were piles of epaper that she needed either to read or reprocess. A ficus had shed a

scatter of leaves on the floor in front of the north window. Her busts of Shakespeare and Peter Jackson needed dusting, as did her three Oscars.

She slumped as she remembered that the beamer was contemplating the mess that was her life along with her.

"So," she said aloud, "meet Mr. Chair." She settled onto Rake's A-dec 500 and touched the toggle to reposition it. The chair whined as it lifted and tilted backward. Rake had loved that chair. "Guess what, Mr. Chair? We have a guest with us today, a beamer. Mr. Nobody." She sipped her coffee. "You don't mind if we call you that, do you? Oh, and you'll have to excuse Mr. Chair. He's like you, doesn't speak. Neither does Mr. Shakespeare or poor Miss Ficus, going bald over there. Mr. Raven, on the other hand . . ." She paused and curled her fingers over the keypads built into the arms of the dentist's chair. "What do you say, Mick?"

She and Rake had first introduced Mick Raven in *A Shot of Moonlight*. That was back in the old virtual reality days, when you watched and listened to neuros, instead of inviting them to live between your ears. Mick was Rake's idealized version of himself—healthier, smarter, and with better hair. He wasn't a private detective exactly, more like a research librarian with a gun. He cracked wise so relentlessly that at first Mercedes had regarded Mick as a kind of joke that Rake was playing. But when Mick got popular, Rake had started taking his hero seriously. Mercedes felt as if she had to indulge him. They churned out eleven sequels in five years and had been recoding them for full neutrality when she left Rake and their money for John Dark. She'd given Rake permission to do whatever he wanted with their franchise when they broke up, but there had been no more new Mick Raven adventures. Until now.

She snugged the mindreader onto her head, draping its thick cable over the back of the chair.

=Okay,= she thought. =Where were we?=-

=Scene Five,= thought Dai-rinin. =Packet 342.=

=The first time he sees the Stallworth place?=-

=Yes.=

=Begin.= Mercedes concentrated on the wallscreen and Mick Raven swung off his bicycle.

5.342: <impression: shrink Ascot House, Buckinghamshire, England 20%. Hold through 5.350>

5.343: <Mick's thoughtstream:> 122 Fairview is the kind of Mock Tudor mansion that would give Henry VIII nightmares.

5.344: <subliminal: Henry VIII's face pumping like a heart>

5.345: <Mick's thoughtstream:> Its steep roof is covered in bright terracotta and the walls are a hodgepodge of herringbone brickwork and stucco the color of smokers' teeth.

5.346: <smellfx: smoker's breath>

5.347: <Mick's thoughtstream:> Someone painted the half timbers blue—probably a bot.

5.348: <subliminal: out of control blue bot with blue paintbrush hands painting, walls, windows, doors, etc.>

5.349: <Mick's thoughtstream:> I've never quite understood why bots love to paint things; they don't have the color sense that God gave to shrimp.

5.350: <neurofx: limbic bump to subchuckle, level 1>

5.351: <Mick's thoughtstream:> The windows on the first floor have heavy iron casements and diamond-shaped leaded panes.

5.352: <impression: chamfered mullion windows from outside. Hold through 5.358>

5.353: <Mick's thoughtstream:> Anyone looking out of them is going to see a world that is pinched and dark.

5.354: <lightfx: continuous darkening of 5.352 from edges @ 5% per second>

5.355: <Mick's thoughtstream:> An accurate view maybe, but depressing as hell.

5.356: <neurofx: increase serotonin uptake .01%>

5.357: <Mick's thoughtstream> If it were my place, I would've long since busted a chair through those windows to let in some sun.

5.358: <soundfx: glass breaks>

5.359: <impression: chair legs punching through 5.352, daggers of flying glass >

5.360: <neurofx: 70mV stim to amygdaloidal fear complexes >

5.361: <impression: door at the Stud Gate Entrance, Hampton Court Palace>

5.362: <impression: Chevrolet housebot opens the door. Hold through 5.366>

5.363: <bot's dialog> Am I making the acquaintance of Mick Raven?

5.364: <Mick's dialog> Not if I can help it.

5.365: <Mick's thoughtstream> I don't chitchat with bots.

5.366: <Mick's dialog> I'm here to see Bishop Stallworth.

There was a tickle in Mercedes's throat and she coughed. The bot's impression shimmered on the wallscreen, waiting for its next line. Her agent waited for her next thought. Brainstorm was waiting for the new Mick Raven neuro.

What was Mercedes waiting for?

"Damn it, Rake," she muttered. He'd always been the one who knew what Mick was doing. This had been his idea, one last Raven adventure. One last adventure for Rake, dying of chronic myelogenous leukemia, one of the few cancers they hadn't beaten. Only he hadn't had near enough time to finish it and now she was left alone to breathe life into Rake's hard-boiled ghost.

5.367: <Mick's thoughtstream> I don't want to be here, I don't need this. This is a mistake.

=Strike 367,= she thought.

=Struck,= thought her agent.

=I'm think I'm done for today.=

=The contract with Brainstorm requires that you submit *The Bishop of Hell* by February first.=

"I've read the damn contract!" Mercedes was surprised to hear anger in her voice.

=Saving,= thought Dai-rinin. =Ending session.=

She left the mindreader hanging over the arm of the chair. On her way out of the studio, she kicked at a pile of epaper. "Happy birthday, bitch." Plastic sheets sailed across the rug.

Mercedes thought about pouring a bourbon, but had Dai-rinin call a car-ryvan instead. It had two passengers, the Novick boy and Page Buchholtz.

If Page was headed for the birthday party, she didn't let on. "Why Mercedes," she said, "what tears you away from the wall so early?"

"It's ten past eleven in my time zone, Page." Mercedes sat on the bench next to her. She liked Page, even though she was one of the biggest snoops in town. "Ricky Morgan messaged me. I'm picking up a book at the library."

Page gave a teasing giggle. "Oh, is it Ricky now?" The giggle might have fit a teenager but Mercedes thought it was a little tight on a seventy-something who wore size sixteen. "Tell the truth, Mercedes, is it a book you're picking up or . . ." Her voice got all smoky. ". . . the librarian?"

The Novick kid looked like he wanted to throw up. Mercedes didn't blame him. It seemed as if all of her friends in town wanted to push her into some man's bed. Rick Morgan was on all of the shortlists—including her own. But Mercedes wasn't quite sure what to do with him. Her problem was that he *knew* he was on Melton's all star bachelor team, and was cocky about it. Mercedes liked it better when she was catching, not pitching.

She swerved to a different subject. "You want to hear something strange?" She leaned into Page. "I woke up this morning with a beamer."

"Really?" Page practically squealed. "What happened to him?"

"Oh, he's still with me." She touched a finger to the corner of her eye. "Peeping you this very moment."

"You're kidding." There wasn't anyone else in Melton remotely famous enough to attract a beamer. Page's face flushed with excitement and she started to babble. "Who is he? What does it feel like? How do you know he's a he?"

Mercedes was taken aback by the intensity of her reaction. She reminded Page that celebs were never sure who was beaming into their heads. "So I

can't swear that he's a man," she said, "but back when I used to have crowds, I could figure out whether beamers were men or women by what senses they paid attention to. Women like smell and taste. Men watch."

"Oh my god!" Page goggled as if she were the second coming of Zoe Zanzibar. "That is so amazing."

Even the Novick kid seemed impressed.

When the carryvan stopped at the Highmarket, Page floated off, as starstruck as the first time she'd met Mercedes. Mercedes cursed her own foolishness. Page would bring this bit of gossip to every wall in town. Mercedes had intended to abandon what little fame she had left when she moved to Melton. So what if all her friends here knew that she had been a neutrality star once? Her day had passed. Scripted neuros like *The Bishop of Hell* were passé. Neutrality was all about plotless worldsapes and unscripted sense dumps these days.

So why was Page acting like a drooling fan again?

"Lady." Young Novick pulled one of his earstones out. "You maded *Sleeping on Razors*, did you?"

"I worked on it, yes."

"With John Dark?"

"That's right."

"Is total." He nodded approval. "What be he like? Feeds say he gets the ladies."

She didn't hesitate. "Horny as two minks and a goat."

The kid grinned and popped the earstone back in. "You most lucky."

The carryvan dropped her off in front of the library but she scuttled to the rear entrance. She was spooked and didn't want to run the gauntlet of the front desk and the neurocom and the mediapod and the stacks of books to get to Ricky's office.

=All your fault, Mr. Nobody,= she thought, as she stole up to the third floor. =You're giving me a reputation.= Ricky wasn't in, so she had Dai-rinin message him. Minutes later, there came a tap at the door.

"Are you decent?" said Ricky.

She opened the door and pulled him in by the arm. "I'm not here."

"Let me know when you arrive, will you?" He gave her a polite kiss. "I'm taking you to lunch."

"You and how many others?"

He stepped away from her, then waggled a finger in mock severity.

"So it's true," she said.

"Now I see why you make detective neuros."

"Raven isn't a detective and I do plenty of other stuff." She sighed. "Let's have the guest list."

"There'll be fifteen for sure, maybe as many as eighteen, and that's all I'm saying." He showed her a crooked smile. "You'll know everybody."

She settled onto the chair behind his desk. "You shouldn't have."

"I didn't." He sorted through a stack of books in a cart by the door. "Janeel and Page put this together."

"I don't like surprises, Ricky."

"And this isn't going to be one." He dropped a book in front of her.

"This him?" Mercedes picked up *Raymond Chandler: Stories and Early Novels*.

"I can't believe you've never read Chandler," said Ricky. "His detective, Marlowe, could be Mick Raven's grandfather."

She opened the book to a random page. "I needed a drink," she read aloud, "I needed a lot of life insurance, I needed a vacation, I needed a home in the country. What I had was a coat, a hat, and a gun."

"See?" said Ricky. "You could steal from him six days a week and nobody would know it wasn't you."

"What makes you think I need to steal from anyone?"

"Ah, you're in a fighting mood today." He held up both hands in surrender. "All hail Mercedes Nunez, queen of . . ."

She reached into the candy dish on his desk and threw a jellybean at him.

In the fast company she'd kept as a young woman, nobody would have noticed Ricky Morgan. He was fifty-two and looked as if he belonged behind a desk in some drab second floor office with a view of the company parking lot. Service in the Air Force had straightened his backbone but had left him looking a little rigid. But as soon as he started talking, everything changed. He spoke in complete sentences with a lilting Alabama accent and made eye contact. His laugh made strangers smile. He and Mercedes had dated three times, but were still circling each other. The way she added him up, there were about as many possibilities as liabilities. He had charm, but he spread it promiscuously. He was divorced, but that proved that he was willing to commit.

As they walked down Lyon Street, Mercedes let him take her hand. "If things get too awful, just give me a sign. I'll get you out," he said.

"I'll be all right. They're friends. They mean well."

"We love you, Mercedes. We're happy you live here with us."

She squeezed his hand but said nothing.

"So I was wondering if you might consider giving a talk at one of my First Friday Forums."

"What kind of talk?"

"Just basic stuff, like where do you get your ideas, how a project gets started. I'm sure there'd be a big turnout. You've lived here almost two years now and you're still our number one request at the neurocom. The demand was there so I've bought pretty much everything you've done."

"Really?" Mercedes had never accessed the library's neurocom. "The artsy stuff? *Suit of Clay*? *BlueSkin*?"

"All of them, although I've put warnings on the sexy material and restricted access. You're our local celebrity, Mercedes. You've won Oscars."

"For Achievement in Neurological Special Effects." She snorted. "The ones they give away in the afternoon ceremony."

"Just think about it, all right? It would mean a lot to people."

Copper's lone wallscreen was set to a view of 11th Street, so that whether diners looked out the window or at the wall, they saw the same scene. Mercedes appreciated the understated view—too many restaurants had walls set to calving icebergs or Martian dust storms or, worst of all, videotage football. A copper bar with a dozen stools stretched to the left of the

restaurant's entrance. To the right was an open kitchen. Copper-topped tables were scattered artfully around the L-shaped dining room.

Mercedes was surprised when they were shown to a table for two by the bar. As soon as they were seated, however, the singing began.

Mercedes couldn't see the singers because the party was around the corner. Rick nodded at the wall. For the first time ever, it had turned its gaze inward from the street. Half of the wall showed a long table surrounded by Mercedes's party. She and Ricky watched themselves on the other half. "It would be nice if you looked surprised," he murmured.

There was wild applause as she came around the corner; she felt the sound in her bones. What was it Rick had said? *We love you, Mercedes*. Many people in her life had spoken of love, but most of them had just been breathing on her. However, in this moment she could make herself believe that these people with their glowing faces felt something like true affection for her. Her own face felt odd and she realized that a smile had spread across it, stretching muscles she hadn't used since Rake had died.

"Speech, speech!" called Matti Ryberg.

"Are you surprised?" said Barb Bovyn as she handed Mercedes and Ricky flutes of champagne.

Everyone raised their glasses to her. "To Mercedes," called Page. Mercedes wanted to acknowledge the toast but there was a brick caught in her throat so she just clicked flutes with those nearest her.

"I fear," said Ricky, "that she's been struck dumb."

Mercedes nudged him with her elbow. "Thank you," she said and then coughed. "Thank you all for being so wonderful and so crazy."

Everybody laughed.

"Is there a seat for me?" she said.

As she took her place she began to pick out individual faces. Page and Janeel were conferring at the far end of the table. Coco Akita had made it on time after all. There was a question in her eyes; Mercedes answered it by holding a forefinger to her lips. The Duttons, her next door neighbors, were chatting with Billy and Ambati, who she'd met at Heartprints, her grief support group. She waved to Steve Broulidakis, who had been Rake's doctor. Bromley, who built racing bicycles, said something that made Donna DiMatta, the electrician who had wired her studio, laugh. Both were watching Mercedes closely. Some of these people had been Rake's friends first, but they had stuck by her in the year since he'd died. Now Page and Janeel stared at her too, seeming about to burst with conspiratorial excitement. Then Mercedes noticed the man sitting directly behind them with his back turned to the table.

Page clinked a butter knife against her champagne flute.

"Another surprise for our birthday girl," she said. "A special guest."

The man stood, his back still to them. Mercedes rested both hands on the edge of the table but as he turned, she pushed back until her arms were straight. She gripped the table as if she were afraid her chair might collapse. Her friends started clapping. Then everyone in the restaurant was on their feet.

John Dark bowed to her, a grin on his thin lips.

He was still ridiculously handsome and, as always, flamboyantly

dressed. If his celebrity was not enough to bring him to the center of every room's attention, his appearance was. He wore a black velveteen frock coat with silver buttons over a powder blue waistcoat. His trousers were black-pinstriped and his loose white shirt was open at the neck. He seemed not to have aged in the nine years since she'd last seen him, but then he wouldn't. He was in his eighties, but as long as Dow Chemical kept making surgical poly he would continue to stop foolish hearts.

As the applause faded, Janeel spoke up. "He came all the way from Indonesia to see you, Mercedes. What was the name of the town again, John?"

"Surabaya." Dark's voice always made Mercedes think of a cat purring. "A bit more than a town, Janeel—eight million people live there. The second largest city in Indonesia."

Mercedes fought to steady herself against the whirlwind of emotions that Dark always stirred in her. =Look, Mr. Nobody,= she thought at her beamer. =Look at all that star power.=

The party broke up just before two-thirty. Dr. Broulidakis had patients to see and as soon as he bowed out, the others made their excuses. Ricky had to get back to the library. She had hoped he might ask her to a birthday dinner, maybe even to his place, but he gave her nothing but a bland good-bye kiss. How was the birthday girl going to get home? John Dark had rented a carbot at the airport and said he could give rides, space permitting.

He squeezed Page, Lionel and Klára Dutton, Mercedes, and himself into a Volkswagen Sturm. Mercedes found herself wedged against Dark. Being so close to him brought back memories, not all unpleasant. Nobody said much as the carbot passed down the streets of Melton. Now that the party was over, her friends seemed stricken by their proximity to the famous man. The carbot dropped Page off, and moments later pulled up to Mercedes's house. The Duttons thanked Dark as effusively as if he'd just saved their lives.

She watched her neighbors trudge across Rake's overgrown lawn—except it was her lawn now. She hadn't quite realized that before, but having Dark here made her see her life through his eyes. He'd be wondering what she was doing with a lawn. And a house.

Dark nudged her. "Too spooked to invite an old friend in?"

"Not spooked at all," she said, "old friend." What else could she do? If she turned him away, he would probably have the carbot drive to the high school so he could spend the afternoon hitting on sophomores. Besides, Mercedes doubted that he'd come just for her birthday. He wanted something.

"You still have that glow, Mercedes," said Dark. "Your superpower. Use it for good."

"Don't start." She walked him to the front door. "Dai-rinin?" she said. The lock clicked open.

"Who knew that living in the country would agree so well with you? Couldn't keep my eyes off you at lunch."

Even though she had her back to him, she could feel the heat in his voice. She warned herself not to do anything stupid. This *was* John Dark. "It's just a look I sprayed on this morning." She pushed the door open. "It'll wash off."

He brushed against her arm as he passed into the house. "Not all of it."

She pointed him at the couch in the living room and then pulled a chair in from the kitchen. She might have been embarrassed had a stranger seen the crust of English muffin from breakfast on the coffee table, but Dark knew from experience that she was no housekeeper.

"Terrible news about Rake," he said.

"News?" She turned the kitchen chair around and straddled it with the back facing him. "We buried him a year ago."

"My agent sent flowers, yes?"

"The biggest bouquet in the church."

He leaned back and unbuttoned his jacket. "Worked with him years ago at Disney—before they sold everything off." It fell open over the blue waistcoat. "Didn't seem like the church type."

"He got scared at the end. I think he blindfolded himself with religion so he didn't have to see what was coming."

"And you moved here to ease his pain."

"He was in remission when he asked me and I had nothing better to do after *Suit of Clay* gassed." She shrugged. "I knew he was sick, but he'd always been sick. His doctors claimed they could manage the cancer. They did, for a while."

"Terrible, yes."

"We never slept together," she said. "Here, I mean." She had no idea why she'd blurted this out, except that she hadn't appreciated the crack about easing Rake's pain. Dark always thought that he knew more about her than he really did.

He let it pass. "Working on anything?"

"We started a new Mick Raven before the relapse."

"Scripted is a hard sell these days." He reached into the pocket of his frock coat. "Even for me." He showed her a silver hip flask. "Still poisoning yourself with bourbon?"

"What is this, Dark? What do you want?"

"Evan Williams Single Barrel Vintage." He set it on the coffee table. "Got to build up my courage, yes?"

"For what?" She laughed. "You're such a liar."

"My superpower." He laughed too.

She went to the kitchen. "You're doing well," she called. "At least that's what the feeds say." Dai-rinin pushed two glasses out of the dishcopier. "Will you be nominated for *The Last Lancelot*?"

"Probably." He sounded uncharacteristically glum. "But so what? Been coasting on brains and good looks for years. Can't remember the last time I had a new idea."

"Tell me about it." She set the glasses in front of him.

"Not that there's a market for ideas. All those damn worldsapes. People claim that they don't want to be ordered around in their own heads—but people are morons. They need to be told what to do." He poured a couple of centimeters of bourbon into her glass. "Ran into your mother last month at Antonio's."

"Really?" She took the glass from him. "Did you sleep with her?"

"That was a mistake, Mercedes. You should have warned me." He poured himself a drink. "She said she misses you."

"You want me to toss you out?" She held her thumb and forefinger just a sliver apart. "You're this close to being on the street, Dark."

"The glow becomes a fire, yes. Remember how we burned together?" He offered her his glass. "So much history between us." Reluctantly she clinked hers against it. "Not all of it bad."

She tasted the whiskey. It was as she remembered Williams, starting sweet but finishing dry with hints of oak and caramel and apples. It had been a while since she'd had expensive bourbon. "Tell me about this Deddy Suryochondro. From Indonesia. Is he even real?"

He tapped the cushion of the couch beside him. She took another drink and scooted around the coffee table.

"A fallback," he said, "in case you wouldn't see me."

"How could I not see you?" She sat an arm's length from him. "You showed up at my party. You dazzled all my friends."

"Deft move, yes?" He gave her a look that would melt chocolate. "Gives you a chance to get used to the idea that I'm back."

"Back?"

"And now here we are. The two of us, alone in your house. Talking. Not shouting." He swirled bourbon in his glass. "Not like when you left."

"I hated you then."

He nodded. "That made me want you even more. You're hard to give up, Mercedes."

She started. How could she have been so oblivious? Dark never gave up. "My surprise party," she said. "That wasn't them. It was you."

"Your friend Page picked the restaurant. Janeel invited everyone."

"They came to see you." She set her empty glass down as if it might explode. "Lunch with John Dark. Something to tell the grandkids."

"They're nice people. But not like us."

"I'm not like you."

"We're drifting, Mercedes. We need to find a new way."

"What do you want, Dark?"

"Want?" He held up his hand with fingers spread. "Want an Oscar for *Lancelot*, even though it's crap." He ticked his thumb. "Want inspiration. Something to make me excited again." He ticked his forefinger. "Want to work with you again." Another finger. "Want to undress you." Another finger, and the pinky. "Then make love."

She laughed at him. And at herself. She'd known he would say something like this when she'd first seen him at Copper. And yet she'd tried to deny that she knew, because she wasn't sure how she would reply.

"You did say want." Spots of color bloomed on his cheeks. She'd always liked the way he blushed. "Tell me it's out of the question."

"You're so good at being you, Dark. How often does that line work?"

He grinned.

"And you know why it works? Because of the Oscars and the money and a body that isn't even yours."

"It's a nice body." Dark's voice was husky. "Paid good money for this body."

She felt a dizziness that had nothing to do with alcohol. "I don't want charity."

He leaned close and whispered. "And I don't give it."

* * *

She took him to Rake's bed because hers was just a twin in the guest room. As they lay entangled afterward, Mercedes examined her feelings. Did she feel guilty? Angry? Confused? No, no, and no. She felt content and warm and alive. She had been cooped up in her head for so long that her body had gone numb.

"You want to collaborate, Dark?"

"That was want number two." He frowned. "Or was it three?"

"Our first project is finishing the Mick Raven."

"Scripted is hard to . . ."

She clamped a hand over his mouth. "Mick Raven. And here in Melton, where all my friends live."

He nodded.

She let her hand drop and trace the line of his chin. "You worked hard to get me into bed. Devious, but I appreciate the effort. Nobody else was making one."

"People are morons."

"How many times have I taken you back, Dark?"

He propped himself up on an elbow. "Are you talking about times when we were together and had a spat, or the times that we were actually separated?"

She sighed. "How long is this time?"

"Forever and ever, amen. Our new way, Mercedes." She had never seen him embarrassed before. "Going to be eighty-three in January, and . . ."

Her hand went back over his mouth. "And when a man gets to be your age he starts thinking about settling down with just one good woman."

He nipped at her palm and she jerked her hand away, laughing. Then she pitched back onto her pillow and covered her face with the sheet.

"What?" said Dark.

"I forgot," she said, still laughing. "Just like in the old days. I have a beamer, Dark." She peeked at him from beneath the sheet. "And I forgot to put him in a blind—sorry." She growled. "You took him for one hell of a ride."

"I know."

She pulled the sheet completely off her face and stared.

"Meet Mr. Nobody." He shrugged. "One way or another, I was going to be with you today."

Mercedes was shocked, but not that he would masturbate. The gossip feeds claimed celebrities did it all the time. She had secretly tried it once herself, but it had only given her a headache. No, what surprised her was that he would admit it. "Contact in meatspace, Dark." She giggled. "I could sue." Maybe he really had found a new way. "Take you for millions."

"Go ahead." He kissed her. "Except if we get married, you'd just be suing yourself."

"Married?"

"Married, yes."

She tasted the word and found it to her liking. It sat sweet on the tongue with a resiny, almond warmth and a finish of freshly mown hay. =So how was it for you?= she thought. =Good both ways?=
 "Very enjoyable." He tugged at the sheet and it slipped off her shoulders. "But it should be even better next time." O

BURGERDROID

Felicity Shoulders

Felicity Shoulders is an Oregonian who planned to be a paleontologist and ended up writing instead. This wry look at the fast-food industry is her first published fiction.

"I don't want to go!" Henry said, pushing his lunchbox out of sight behind the sofa to gain time.

"I don't want to go either. But I am subject to the tyranny of capitalism, and you are subject to the tyranny of me." I fished out the lunchbox and closed Henry's fingers over the handle.

"It isn't fair," Henry said. "Other people have weekends on Saturday."

"Of course it's not fair. That's why it's called 'tyranny.'"

Henry sat down to cry.

"Oh no, you don't!" I hurried on my own coat and tugged him up by his lunch-free hand. "You are not too big for the fireman's carry."

"Why can't we stay?" Henry asked as I frog-marched him to the car.

"Because robots are never late to work."

With Henry dropped off at daycare, I zoomed to the industrial park and scurried from my car to the door of "Thomson International Marine Insurance." I unlocked both locks on the front door and let it bang shut behind me, sending an eerie sound through the metal blinds that blocked the view through every door and window. I passed the empty reception desk and punched my code into the security door that led to my actual workplace.

As the door opened, the first thing visible was Mel's face, glowing with reflected pallor from his screens. "You're cutting it close, Elsa." He scowled.

"My little boy was sick," I said.

Mel turned back to his desk. I let the door close and started for the women's lockers, but he said, "Good benefits at the ballet?"

"What was that?" I turned back. He was still looking at his computer.

"Health insurance, for when your son gets sick. Did the dance company cover much?"

I took off my coat, hoping he couldn't see the anger hot in my cheeks. "No."

He didn't say anything else, just let me waste more time staring before I turned and sped to my locker.

Penny was already in costume, except for the mask, and using her freedom from Mel's gaze to loll and read a *Vogue*.

"Need any help?" she offered.

I checked the clock and shook my head. "Plenty of time for an old hand."

I stripped off my business casual disguise and started to put on my shiny trousers.

"Says here," Penny whispered, "that 'vibrant metallics' are in for winter. Too bad we can't wear this shit off the job."

I smiled, pulling on my gloves. "I don't feel vibrant."

Penny held up the magazine, displaying a busty model swathed in gold lamé. "How can you not be vibrant when she paid thousands for the boobs you get to wear every day for free?"

"Penny!" I slid my metallic hoodie over my head and tucked back errant wisps of hair.

"Oh come on," she dropped the magazine and poked the metal breasts she was wearing. "How are these practical?"

"They have to accommodate the various breast sizes of their employees." I sat down to strap on my platform shoes and greaves.

"Sure. They're so concerned with that, yet the waists on these things are how tiny?" Penny held up my breastplate. "You know, I want to make a reverse-mold sculpture of these things. You know, the shape of the space inside this?"

"You can't. Can you? Do Inhibichips do sculpting?"

"If they didn't, I probably would have sculpted a robot boob out of mashed potatoes years ago."

I grabbed the breastplate, flipped the power switch inside, and started to fit it on. "I wonder how they work that, if it's the same part of the brain. Talking about fake robots, sculpting robot costumes? That can't be the same."

"Shit, I don't know. The whole thing with Inhibicreeps me out. I never would let someone slice my head open . . ." she waited for me to give her a look " . . . unless I really needed prescription coverage." She sat forward and started on my back fastenings.

I shrugged. "I already had two."

Penny paused. "Why the hell would you have two Inhibichips?"

"I started chain-smoking again when the jerk ran off. I sprang for an InstaQuit to save Henry's little baby lungs."

"And the other?"

I felt suddenly embarrassed, and slipped my masked helmet on. "Anti-swearing."

"You paid for a chip to stop yourself . . ."

"It was a two for one deal."

We lined up for Mel's inspection, Penny and I filing from our bank of lockers, Roy and Vikram from the men's. Like us, their metal faces were mirror-smooth, empty-eyed, with slits for mouths. Behind, their helmets drew to a cone-like point, where ours curled up in a flange that looked suspiciously like a 1950's flip-cut. Both pairs were indistinguishable unless you scrutinized our shoes—Pen, for example, needed a half-inch less sole to reach the standardized female height than I did. We mustered before Mel, who polished a smudge off one of the men's faceplates, assured himself that our knee-pads were symmetrically donned, and barked, "Stand up straighter, Elsa."

"I'm Penny, sir."

Mel narrowed his eyes and resumed his scrutiny. "Voice check."

"I'm Penny," I said, voice modulated to a flat soprano buzz.

"No, I'm Penny," she said, in identical tones.

"Would you like fries with that?" said one roboguy.

"Good morning," said the other. Identical baritones.

Mel tested the lights on our breastplates—red, orange, blue, with accompanying sounds—and sound-checked our earpieces.

"Let's go, people," he said at last, as if he had been waiting on us. "Robots are never late to work."

I shot him a look over my shoulder as I marched to my place behind Roy, or Vikram, at the double door. The clock above gave us four minutes.

I didn't know how the others prepared mentally for the day. I imagined Roy, an actor, was thinking about gears, lubricated hydraulics, logic circuits. Penny was probably still thinking about the winter fashion lines, or contemplating the horror of a life without swearing. Vikram I barely knew. As for me, I closed my eyes and let all the emotion drain down into my toes and puddle on the floor around my platforms. No hurry, energy, desire for grace. No attempt to inspire envy or lust. Movement had motive, efficiency, no beauty. I emptied myself and waited for a stimulus, waited to react. The bell rang, and we clanked into the public space of Burgerdroid, the Restaurant of the Future™.

No actual lies were told. What does "Restaurant of the Future" mean, anyway? What does it promise? Burgerdroid's ads just showed what you'd see at any Burgerdroid at lunch or dinner time. They never claimed the metallic beings behind the counter were robots, but everyone believed they were.

The actual cooking was heavily automated, to avoid displays of human error. The customers could watch the uniform burgers created to their specifications, the calibrated condiment squirters ooze precise amounts of goo onto the buns in nice round slicks. We moved the components from place to place, pressed buttons, waited for beeps, assembled the food and drinks, took their money.

The company could have eliminated us entirely. Add a few more belts and a push-button interface, and you'd have had the perfect marriage of a fifties "automat" and a short-order cook—and the same burger for five dollars rather than fifteen. But the good folks at Burgerdroid HQ knew that the food wasn't the appeal. Automation isn't as interesting as automatons. A real humanoid robot cost more than a Lamborghini, and was even less practical. People came to Burgerdroid like tourists, because they would never own a robot themselves.

My first customers that day were a couple with a four-year-old. The little girl had to be dragged across the glossy floor, so dubious was she about the shining metal faces.

"Good morning, and welcome to Burgerdroid!" I said. "Will you be ordering separately or together?"

"Together," the woman said as the man hoisted the girl up and whispered reassurances.

"She's just like Ruby Robot on *Sesame Street*!" I heard him say. "You're not afraid of Ruby!"

The parents ordered two Wasabi Burger combos and a Future Meal, and watched Roy and Vikram assemble their order from the various machines. They pointed and whispered as if they were at a museum, or the zoo. The crowning glory was, of course, the tiny robot toy that dropped from a tube into the shining Future Meal box.

"Here is your receipt," I said. "Thank you for visiting the Restaurant of the Future!" For most people, this was the payoff—the metal fingers pressing the receipt into their hand. Cold round fingertips, hard for pressing buttons, brushing their palms. For the parents, we do something else. I bent towards the little girl. "Small customer! Would you like a Burger-droid sticker?"

She lost her shyness at the suggestion and nodded. I showed her the Mylar sticker before sticking it gently to her shirt. The parents beamed and the child bent to examine it further—my face, implacably friendly, above the BD logo.

We rotated jobs every hour, so one of us could take a break—supposedly the heat of the kitchen got to our delicate circuitry or something, which was not entirely untrue. No matter how much air conditioning there was, we got overheated in those costumes. The yellow light on the breastplate told us to swap jobs. The red was a panic button we could activate ourselves, if we dropped something or felt sick. The procedure was to start the "malfunction" light with a control in one glove, and perform a convincing mechanical problem for the customers before beating a retreat to the back room. Mel's official job was "robot mechanic."

The lunch rush arrived, and I fell into a groove, shifting between bits of pre-scripted welcome patter in a pseudorandom stream. I rang up some giggling teens, and the white-collar workers from the office park that come every day.

The regulars come for a variety of reasons. Because it's convenient, or trendy, or because they don't care how much their expense account pays for a burger.

"Greetings and salutations, hungry human!" I said to a man fingering his tie. I was long past wondering who decided robots are intrinsically camp.

"Umm, hi." The young man blushed. "Uh, can I get a Barbeque Chicken Burger with tofu-tots?"

"Certainly, sir. Would you like a beverage with your meal?"

"Water? Just water, if that's okay."

"Certainly, sir. I will now complete your transaction." He held his card up to the prox-reader and shuffled his feet as the charge went through. "Here is your receipt. The Restaurant of the Future wishes you a healthy and happy day!"

"You too," he said, then looked confused and sheepish. He took a step back and ran into the burly businessman behind him. I loved the new customers.

The businessman stepped forward, his eyes still on a computer display in his hand.

"Good afternoon, and welcome to—"

"Double cheeseburger with secret sauce, extra large fries, large coffee, one pudding pie."

"Which flav—"

"Strawberry."

"Certainly, sir. I will now complete your transaction." The man stalked to the condiment bar, still without looking at me. "Here is your receipt. Thank you for visiting the Restaurant of the Future!" I finished. The job had taught me that some people will pay twenty-five dollars for fast food every day if it allows them to avoid human contact.

Penny opened the door to clean the fingerprints off, letting Simone inside. I prayed rotation would sound before she reached the front of the line. Simone was a roboregular.

The roboregulars came to observe us. They lived for discoveries like the fact that we only asked them whether they're paying together if they were standing side by side—if they came in together but stood one behind the other, we automatically made up separate tabs. For some reason this was fascinating to them. The problem is, of course, that we could never make a mistake. My head hurt at the sight of Simone's thin, eager face.

"Here is your receipt. Thank you for visiting the Restaurant of the Future!" The yellow light flashed as the women in front of Simone turned to go, and I pivoted with great relief and marched into the back room for my break. Let Vikram deal with Simone.

In the back, I pulled off my helmet and scratched my eyebrow at last. Mel was motionless, analyzing all the screens for a break in pattern, a call to action. The troll seemed to think his job was as important as a Secret Service agent's. Sure, there was danger. The whole robot farce was fabulously expensive. They hired dancers and actors when they could, bribed us with health insurance to minimize turnover. The costumes, voice modulators, and breastplates were expensive, as were the Inhibichips, the automatic kitchens. The need for a cover business for employee entrance added overhead, and the air conditioning costs were sky-high. However, the company was doing well. They could charge exorbitant amounts for the food. No one complained about the lack of drive-through because everyone wanted to interact with a robot. A Burgerdroid in every major town in North America and Japan, good profits . . . there were advantages to the business model.

None of us could even hint to a union organizer that we worked in a Burgerdroid without breaking our ironclad Non-Disclosures. The occasional protest by jobs-for-humans groups—which we always laughed over in the locker rooms—gave free publicity, as did the inevitable newspaper fluff-piece in each town where a BD opened. It couldn't last forever—if nothing else, someday robots would be affordable and the thrill would fade—but no one, neither Mel playing Mission Control nor me, blowing cold air on my face from a nozzle near the lockers, wanted to be the one to end the run.

That afternoon, I was on grill duty. In theory, this involved dispensing patties, aligning cheese slices and bacon on the finished patties, and transferring them to the other machine, but in fact it was, like most jobs at Burgerdroid, half staring into the distance, not moving until you heard a beep. You got good at staring, working there.

At about three, some yobbos came into the empty restaurant. The

smaller one was a disheveled Puck with ginger hair and a Harley Davidson jacket. The larger stood by as Ginger howled, "Lookit meeee! I'm a roooooobot!" and executed some wild dance maneuvers. This sort of thing happened once in a while when no other patrons were present. It was some mixture of the daring of the unobserved and the sort of mentality that enjoys taunting the guards at Buckingham Palace. "I'm a roooooobot!"

"No, sir, you are a human," said Roy, who was on register. "As such, may I interest you in a delicious Burgerdroid Special Bacon Burger?"

"I'd rather rot," the young man said, and looked around. He sashayed over to the condiment bar and started stuffing relish packets into his jacket. "I bet Roborelish is the best!"

"Sir," said Roy, "If I understand your stated intention correctly, you do not plan to partake of our delicious Burgerdroid food. The condiment bar is for the pleasure and convenience of those who do partake."

"Whoooo! Come stop me, robot boy!" Ginger threw mustard packets on the floor and started to jump on them.

Roy thumbed a control on his register and we converged on the counter, obedient to the signal in our ears. We stood in a perfect line as if for Mel's morning inspection. "Sir, I must ask you to leave. The police have been called should you require further incentive or assistance." "The police have been called" signaled Mel to phone them.

Ginger stopped smearing ketchup on the windows and looked shocked. "Big robot like you needs the pigs?"

"Sir, I must ask you to leave," Roy repeated.

"Fine. Damn place is no fun anyway." He nodded to Bashful, who preceded him out. He pointed at me as he left, and winked. "Nice Roborack." He jogged off, consulting his watch.

It wasn't that unusual, and Mel canceled the police before they arrived. I was just glad it was Vikram's turn to be on break and cleaning—I wouldn't have to mop up.

It was Vikram's turn to close, too, with Penny. In the back, I shucked off my carapace and stroked my sweaty hair, the malleable flesh of my face. I could hear Roy showering across the divider, singing softly. We all had our rituals. I climbed into the women's shower, running it cold for a moment like a baptism. Hair dried and disguise reassumed, I emerged into Mel's abandoned domain—he went home when the restaurant closed—and was surprised to see Roy standing by the bank of darkened screens. He had turned one on and was watching the foreshortened metallic forms of Penny and Vikram, sweeping and emptying trash.

Roy was about my age, I was sure, but in his office costume, white button-up shirt not quite buttoned up, he looked younger. Prep-school boy

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sans blazer, an earnest college Young Repub. He turned guiltily and clicked the monitor off, and his face assumed its proper age, its laugh lines and bohemian, world-weary brows.

"I wonder sometimes what we look like. Mel doesn't exactly invite over-the-shoulder viewing during breaks."

I laughed. "Any actor wants to see how he looks on TV."

"I'm guessing, just like Vikram," he smiled. "I'll actually get another chance to see, soon. I've got a commercial."

"What kind?"

"Pizza."

"Ordering or delivering?"

"A wandering pizza boy, I."

"Really?"

"Hey, you don't think I have the chops?"

I blushed, "No, they just usually cast goofy guys for that."

"I can do goofy," he said, and cut a caper as he opened the door to the office.

"Nice job with Tweedle-Dee today. 'No sir, you are a human'? I almost laughed out loud."

"Sorry about that," he grinned. "What would you have done? There's no script for that."

We passed into the still office. "This place creeps me out," I said. "Fake family pictures and knickknacks. It's like it's embalmed."

"Do you think every office is like this one? Same knickknacks?"

I shrugged. "The names vary. H.E. Underwriters or something is the one over in Fairfield."

"At least we have the majesty of the sea," Roy said as we passed out into the chilly night. He rubbed the words "Marine Insurance" as if for luck, and we walked to our respective economical cars.

Henry was in a mood when I reached daycare. "What is it now?"

"The teacher thinks I lie."

"Why's that?" Henry tried to respond by shoving a colorful sheet of paper in my face as I negotiated a dangerous merge. "Ack! Wait, Henry, wait!"

At a red light, I looked at the drawing on his lap, and felt all my internal organs jump together and cling like a pile of just-dried socks. Lovingly rendered in every metallic shade in the daycare's crayon collection was a robot. Next to it was the brown-haired figure I knew was meant to be me. If I hadn't had that Inhibichip, Henry might have expanded his vocabulary. I turned into the nearest parking lot and stopped.

Turning to Henry and picking up the paper, I said (in the sickly frantic voice I despise when I hear other parents use it), "What's the picture of, Henry?"

He looked at me a bit oddly. "The teacher said to draw what our parents did for a job."

"What did you draw, sweetie?" I said in the same oversweet tone.

"Well, you never said what your job is, but I guess it's with robots. So I said you wash robots. They have to get dirty, right? And they can't take baths or they'd rust."

I started to laugh. Now that I knew, it was clear that the tiny brown-haired "Mom" was brandishing a pink sponge at the robot. It was still too close. I'd be knocked down a pay grade if BDHQ found out.

"What *do* you do, Mom?" Henry asked. He doesn't like being laughed at.

"Sorry, Henry. Sorry. I—I am in insurance."

I spent the rest of the drive explaining insurance, and the walk into the house lying about what I had to do with it.

"What are we having for dinner, Mom?" he yelled down the stairs. Perhaps 9:30 is too late for a child to eat dinner, but that's the way life was in our condo.

"We are having mini-pizzas. Please be more considerate of the neighbors," I said in a normal tone.

"Whaaaaaat?"

I gave up on communication and stood at the stove, topped the neat rows of English muffins with tomato slices and cheese, slid the tray into the oven. The oven ticked and whirled, and I stood, feeling drained. I tried to name the color of the numbers on the range's clock—green, but almost teal. The color of scrubs on old hospital shows.

"Mom? Mom . . ." Henry frowned at me.

"Umm, what, honey?"

"You're just standing there."

"Sorry, I must have gotten distracted. What's up?"

"What's for dinner? I asked ages ago."

"And ages ago I said mini-pizz—darn," I hadn't set a timer. The pizzas were a little brown and dry, but I put them on the plates and we dug in. He didn't complain, and by the time the last pizzas were reduced to crumbs, he was yawning. I carried him piggyback up the stairs and swept all the toys except his teddy bear off his bed. "Good night," I said, but he was already dozing.

I tiptoed down the stairs. The oven clock ticked from 10:19 to 10:20, the segmented shapes changing from one task to another without flow or pause. I caught myself storing the observation, so I could remember, the next day, to try to move like a digital clock.

A noise that was half-laugh, half-sob escaped before I covered my mouth. I stared at our little family room for a moment, then pushed the furniture aside—discovering a few more toys—and put on some music, very low. Raising my arms, I began to dance. My toes tried to trace half-circles on the carpet, but caught in the nap, or jerked too fast through the motion. I watched my arms reflected in a framed print. My elbows seemed so sharp, and I couldn't soften the curve—I couldn't even give my hands fluidity or grace. I moved with economy. Efficiently.

I could feel the thread of music, the lift of my heart, but my body wouldn't move with it. I felt like the dancer on a music box I'd had as a child, frozen in porcelain, lurching in a clockwork spin.

Back at Burgerdroid, I moved through the restaurant, fitting new canisters into the sauce dispensers, filling the toy hopper, replenishing the condiment bar and napkin stations. Sometimes when you're driving, you "wake up" and realize you've driven for miles, vacant but present. I awoke

as the maglocks clicked on the front door and the Burgerdroid sign winked off. Penny and Vikram clopped into the back, and I began stacking chairs on shining tables. I could hear Roy cleaning the deep fryer and powering down the equipment.

"Roy," I said in my robot voice as we retreated through the double doors ourselves, "do you think this job is hurting us?"

He took off his mask and looked quizzical. "More than any other way of trading life for money?"

I laughed tinnily through the robot mouth and shuffled to my locker. Helmet off, bracers and breastplate.

"Yes," Roy said across the divider, muffled.

"Yes, what?"

"It's hurting us."

I walked down the bank of women's lockers, trespassed through the little maze to the men's. Roy was sitting on the bench with his breastplate beside him, head in his gloved hands.

"I can't dance. I tried yesterday." I looked down and started plucking at my gauntlets.

"I'll be the judge," he said. I looked up and he was standing, the metallic pajamas we wore under our armor clinging in patches to his sweat. He reached out and took my hand, cooling my skin with the metal pads on his fingers. Right foot forward, he drove me around the bench in a cramped but elegant waltz. He dipped me over the bench and brought me up, our greaves creaking.

"You dance fine." He tried to smile.

"If I can dance here, half-robot, and not at home . . . what does that mean?"

"What does any of it mean? I honestly thought I'd be playing Hamlet at this age. Hamlet. Like anyone even does that."

"How old are you?" I said.

"Thirty-one. You?"

"Thirty-two," I smiled.

"You know, pretending to be a pizza boy is the greatest thing I've done since hitting thirty."

"I did a mean Sugarplum Fairy last Christmas with the Living Room company. My audience of one was very impressed." Our waltz had paused, and I lifted one leg in an example attitude. Roy crooked his hand under my knee and dipped me again.

"That's more tango than sugarplum," I said as he brought me up. My muscles were humming where his hand touched my thigh. I pushed the hood of his silver tunic off his sweaty mess of hair, and he dropped the dance hands, drawing my face toward his with his still-silver fingers.

I pulled him down onto the bench, and tried to get his gloves off—as it was, the weight of his hands on my breasts reminded me of the breastplate, and the cup sizes between me and those gunmetal gazongas. The gloves gave, and I put off the difficult task of taking the tunic off of him without bringing his ears or nose along by mistake. He in turn settled for going under my shirt, for the moment. Our costumes were so awkward I

felt like a teenager, unsure of myself and my man, how to handle all the zippers and buttons and parts.

He was a good kisser—actors probably practice—and I was just starting to forget where I was, why our mixed-up legs were heavy with greaves and we smelled of beef fat.

"Brrt, brrrt, brrt," said something nearby, and we looked up to see the yellow light, the "change shifts" signal flashing on Roy's breastplate, a few inches above my head.

"I must have forgotten to turn it off." He fumbled for the switch inside the molded plastic and I scooted onto my elbows, put my feet back on the floor. The noise stopped, and Roy sat down beside me, dropping the breastplate with a clatter.

"What are we doing?" I said finally.

"I don't know."

"You're not ready to get involved with a single mom, are you?"

Roy looked down, and picked up one of my discarded gloves. "How is Prince Hal, anyway?"

"Not quite that much trouble—yet. But . . . oh God, I have to pick him up." I sprang up. "Roy . . . I'm sorry."

He stood up, too. "Hey, I'm not," he said, and kissed me on the cheek.

I arrived early the next morning, was already dressed when Penny got there. I ignored her, listening to the lack of conversation on the men's side. I wondered if Roy was thinking about me, or busy getting into lack of character.

We moved to our marks. The first customers were a high-school robotics club. Two or three kids craned over the counter, studying the cooking equipment. A skinny girl in dreadlocks asked lame questions about the menu, as if intimidated by our attentive silence. I was on grill, then moved to assembly during the lunch rush. The primitive arithmetic of fulfilling the meal was easy, but strangely satisfying. I watched the faces of the regulars, and realized that I had seen some of them almost every day for over a year, but I had no idea what they did, what their names were. They were just faces and orders, lists of items and condiments.

I wished there was some way I didn't have to be alone on my break. Mel gave me a look as I walked by that made me want to search the whole locker bank for camera lenses. I longed to talk to Roy, or to Penny. Instead I made faces at every corner I thought might conceal an extra camera and waited for the minutes to tick by.

I fell back into my shift, into my mindless state, hitting buttons as if

MOVING?

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they were cues I had moved beyond, at one with the system, playing without thinking. The sound of human voices rose slowly, and as I sleepwalked from assembly to register, I saw we were in deep dinner rush already; three families spilling and running among the chairs, a few bored businessmen with magazines. My stare was broken by the door opening again—Ginger and Bashful were back.

Ginger smiled as he reached into his waistband and took out a large automatic pistol. Bashful put his back to the door and racked the slide of a sawed-off shotgun. The parents shrieked and grabbed their children, and the older kids dropped fries and milkshakes. There was a sudden scent of urine.

Ginger sauntered up to me. "Robobabe! It's been too long. Now, give us the kitty or we start punching holes."

When in doubt, the training manual had said, *try to act as robotic as possible*. Do robots comply with robbers? Do robots value their metal skins? I could remember hearing something about Laws of Robotics when I was little. Why hadn't they taught us any laws?

"Hey, Robobitch, we don't have all day." I waited for Mel to say something into my ear, for a signal. One came—the intimidation lineup beep, though from who, I wasn't sure. The others clanked into place around me, and I opened my mouth to say that the police had been called.

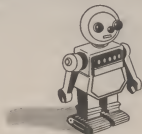
"Look, folks, a can-can line of tin cans! NOT SCARY." Ginger rolled his eyes and grabbed a nearby child. "If you don't mind more ventilation in yourselves, maybe you're programmed to stop this headline?" The kid winced away from the shining automatic and dropped his toy robot.

I moved efficiently to press "Large Fries," "Cash," to collect the twenties, the tens, the fives.

"That's more like it," said Ginger, dropping the hostage and reaching for the cash. He shook it as if he were smoothing together a deck of shuffled cards, and folded it into his jacket pocket. Bashful propped open the door, covered the row of us with his gun as Ginger ran toward him. The smaller man turned on the threshold. "Stupid fucking robots," he said with a grin, and shot me in the chest.

I don't know if he saw what his bullet did, how it tore through the thin metal and shattered the molded plastic, embedding shards of robot skin into my shoulder, ripping into my breast. I fell back against the prep tables, and I could see every customer in the place taking in my exposed flesh, the chrysanthemum of blood.

As I hit the floor, my mouth opened and closed. "Fuck," I wanted to say, "Shit," but no words made it through the mask. ○



THE AUCTIONEER AND THE ANTIQUARIAN, OR, 1962

Forrest Aguirre

Forrest Aguirre lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with his wife and four children. He received a World Fantasy Award for his work as an anthologist, and is the author of *Swans Over the Moon* (Wheatland). The author tells us that although he was born years after the conclusion of his first tale for *Asimov's*, "the story arises, as all stories do, from memories. One of my earliest recollections as a child was seeing wounded soldiers disembarking from medical helicopters when I lived in the Philippines during the closing years of the Vietnam War. That memory, like all others, has been corrupted by my shifting perceptions and experiences in the years since. But the angst-ridden feeling of that time, which carried through my youth as a military brat living overseas during the Cold War, had a very deep impression on my inner psyche. This anxiety mingled with an innocent fascination with things fantastical—space exploration was still relatively new then. In writing 'Auctioneer,' I wanted to capture some of those conflicting, though not mutually exclusive, feelings and examine them through the unreliable lens of my memory."

The auctioneer and the antiquarian could have been ancient brothers, for all Hayden White knew. At least their ages were right for it, or it seemed that way to Hayden. He could never be quite sure. Old Lenny had been fielding bids since before the war and Mister Simms was as musty as the disintegrating tomes that lined his trailer's walls. Those books must have been outdated when Simms taught school, and he had retired eighteen years ago, five years before Hayden's birth, before Stalin died, before spaceflight, before chemotherapy.

Cancer, gravity, and expansionism were age-old. Even the Neanderthal was likely to find himself affected by, if not afflicted with, all three. But to Hayden, who had so little experience of the world, this trifecta was new, fascinating, and horrifying all the same. He wondered why the antidotes, each imposed, explored, or discovered in his lifetime, filled Lenny and Simms with an even more acute dread than the awe he felt as he grew towards his own manhood in that thirteenth year.

January

"Twenty-two thousand miles?" Lenny slapped his leg, shaking the trailer. "How can you miss the moon by twenty-two thousand miles? It's not like it ain't the biggest thing in the sky."

Simms smiled in that knowing way that a trained academic asserts his intellectual superiority—at least to himself. He couldn't expect old Lenny to understand his smirk, though he thought that Hayden might grasp it, if the boy would just look up from the bubblegum trading cards that held his attention, no, scattered his attention across the little trailer's floor.

"A slight miscalculation can send a spacecraft veering off into the void. One transposed digit in the ten-thousandths column would more than do it."

"Oh, would you listen to him?" Lenny bellowed.

Hayden smiled, but didn't look up from his cards.

"Why'd they name it 'Ranger' if it can't find its own way?"

The smirk on Simms' long, thin face faded to a look of exasperation.

"It couldn't find its way precisely because it is an it."

Lenny's fat face scrunched up into incomprehension.

"Wha?"

"It is a mechanical device. It can't find its way any more than your toaster could wander off to the river and go fishing. If it were piloted by a human, the spacecraft might be made to find its mark."

A dreamy look had washed over Lenny's face. "My toaster, fishing. If it had a filet knife it could bring home warmed up crappie cuts, ha, ha!" He burst into a laugh that shook the trailer so hard that Hayden couldn't help but laugh himself.

Simms shook his head.

"Well," Lenny said after his laughter had subsided, "I don't know if a pilot would have been any help anyways. I bet the rocket got veered off by something that didn't want it on the moon."

Simms glared at Lenny. Did he seriously think . . .

"Maybe," Lenny roared, reaching down to pick up one of Hayden's cards, the one closest to him, the one that cost him the least effort to move his substantial frame, "it was one of these here Martians!"

He held up the card, squinting as if scrying some hidden message from the "raygun-wielding, brain-headed, bug-eyed, skull-faced, dark-hearted" figures that stalked the city's streets, disintegrating the U.S. Army, leaving nothing but glowing red bones smoldering in ossified piles.

"Hey, give me that!" Hayden snapped the card from Lenny's pudgy fingers.

Simms chuckled at the slowness of Lenny's reaction.

"All right," Lenny said, as if offended. "But only 'cuz you're sick and your dad ain't around to help you."

"Lenny!" Simms chided.

"Didn't mean anything mean," Lenny explained. "I'm serious, Hayden. Me and Simms here are going to help take care of you. We promised your mom."

"Mom!" Hayden's long red bangs flung back as he suddenly looked up to the grandfather clock that Lenny had somehow muscled up into the trailer.

"It's past dinnertime. Mom's going to kill me!"

"And rightfully so," Simms reminded him, "You have school tomorrow. Christmas break is over."

He gathered the cards up into two piles, threw on his coat, and stuffed the cards, one pile in each hand, into the pockets. Simms held the door open as he rushed out into the cold toward home.

"Good boy," Lenny said solemnly after the door had shut.

"Bright boy," Simms added. "And tough, too."

"He's gonna need it," Lenny finished the thought for Simms.

"Indeed he is. I wonder if he understands the magnitude of what's happening inside him."

"Let's hope not," Lenny said. There was no humor in his voice.

February

Hayden's trailer was substantially larger than old Lenny's. Still, Lenny felt like he took up too much space—a lot more space, in any case, than Hayden's father had taken up when he was alive. Lenny wondered, whenever he visited, if he were crowding out Robert White's ghost. He found a contradiction in the fact that while his body was so much bigger than Bobby's had been, his soul felt so much smaller. He could never step in for Hayden's father—nor did he want to. Heaven knows he was too old for that. Besides, Lenny viewed Lydia as a cousin or niece, not a potential wife. No, Lenny would remain unmarried till the day he died. He was resigned to that fact.

This is not to say that Lydia ever made him feel unwelcome. In fact, she often invited him over, especially during the cold months, as she had done on this occasion. She was a strong woman, of good German Wisconsin

stock. But she knew that there were times when a boy needed encouragement from a man, and Hayden was coming to that age when the sweetness of a good mother needed to be braced by the courage of a bold man. This was such a time.

A voice on the radio ebbed and flowed in static waves: "The United States announced that it would enact a trade embargo against the communist regime in Cuba . . . Astronaut John Glenn, pilot of the *Friendship 7* space capsule, became the first American to orbit the Earth, circling the globe . . ."

Lenny banged the radio with the flat of his hand, startling Lydia, who dropped a handful of silverware back into the sink from which she had just retrieved them.

"Oh, sorry Mrs. White. I just really wanted to hear . . ."

The trailer's front door swung open and Hayden entered in a swish of snow that turned to mist as it hit the hot air inside.

"Hayden, come in quickly," his mother said with practiced patience.

"Sorry, mom. Say, mom," he said with scarcely a breath between sentences, "Devon's dad is going to be coaching the football team next year . . ."

"Hayden," his mother interrupted him so politely that it confused Lenny, who sat watching the interchange, both hands still on the now faintly scratching radio. "Hayden," she repeated, "are you going to say hello to our guest?"

"Oh, heh. Hi, Lenny," he said, then, as if his initial conversation had continued unabated, "... and he thought I might make a good running back if I . . ."

"Hayden!" Lydia's terseness surprised everyone, herself included. "I'm sorry, son, but our guest is here for a specific reason."

Hayden stared at his mother, wide-eyed. Then, the gravity of her demeanor settling on his shoulders, he turned to Lenny, looking at him quizzically, wondering what could be so important.

Lenny, who had also been staring at Lydia with something approaching amazement, came to himself and removed his hands from the radio as if it had suddenly become red hot, or he had been caught with his hands in the cookie jar.

"Ah, um. Yeah," Lenny wilted under the hard stare that Lydia shot his way. Then he looked into the boy's eyes and straightened himself up in his chair.

"Hayden, I've known you for some time now, your whole life, in fact," Lenny tried to speak with as much dignity as he could muster, but he quickly realized that he'd never be the statesman that Simms seemed to be. "Outside of your mom . . ." he paused awkwardly, "... and dad, I know you best of all. Well, me and Mister Simms, really."

Hayden's puzzled look was not improving, Lenny thought. Best to just cut to the chase.

"Boy, you're not well. You know it and I know it. Most of all, your mother knows it. So I'm here to talk to you, to help you with what's coming. Now, I don't understand everything, but I do know that the doctors are gonna try something new with you. Some kinda chemo-therapeutics, I think they call it."

Hayden's look changed from confusion to guarded interest. He took a

seat opposite Lenny, with his back to his mother. Lydia smiled, knowing that his talk was already doing her son some good, despite his silence.

"Now what do you know about these chemo-therapeutics, Hayden?"

The boy looked at his own hands, folded in his lap. He wondered how far down the cancer was—in the bones? In the muscle? Just below the creases of his fingers and palms? He began, at that moment, to realize just how much he did not know.

"Well, the doctors said they'd be giving me a few shots or an IV or something."

Lenny looked hard at the boy, started to say something, then thought better of it. Instead, he reached down under his chair—no small feat for a man of his stature—and brought forth a large, white cardboard box that barely fit underneath the chair. He lifted the lid a sliver and peeked into it, checking its contents at a glance, then resumed his admittedly falsely dignified demeanor.

"Hayden, there's a lot of unknowns in the world. Sometimes we have to face them."

Hayden looked again at his hands. Their skin refused to give up the secrets of life and death that were wrapped therein. He looked up again at Lenny, who followed the boy's eyes as his gaze lifted up to the old man's eyes. In that interchange was an unspoken connection. Even Lydia could sense that something had changed in the air. She lifted her hands from the dishwater. Drying her hands on a towel, she listened to old Lenny, enthralled.

"Matter of fact, there's a lot of things we don't understand. For example, just the other day the planets Neptune and Pluto lined up for the first time in 403 years. Before that there was something the scientists on the radio called a 'Grand Conjunction,' where the Sun, Moon, Venus, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, and Earth were all lined up like ducks in a row. Now, I don't know about all the mechanics on how it happened, maybe Mister Simms could tell you," he paused. "But I do know that that's a marvelous, beautiful thing. You see, the unknown doesn't always have to be scary."

A feather of worry tickled Hayden's heart.

"When I get scared, which happens once in a long while, scared of the unknown, that is . . ." Lenny said.

The feather grew into a set of nervous wings fluttering about in Hayden's chest.

"... At those times, I think about some heroes of mine."

The wings flapped furiously, threatening to tear his heart from behind his ribs.

Lenny could sense the boy's discomfort, could see the fear taking hold at the corners of his widening eyes. He thought Hayden might break into tears. He looked up at Lydia, who stood with folded arms, leaning up against the sink. She gave him the "you're on your own" shrug.

"My heroes aren't afraid of the unknown," a certain surety entered his voice, not the falsely dignified basso he earlier used to boost his own confidence, but a calm certainty. "They step right into it. To them, the unknown is an adventure and an opportunity."

The anxiousness on Hayden's bird-ribcage started to subside.

"Now you know I sell a lot of things in the spring and summer, right, Hayden?"

Hayden smiled. "Right." How could he, or anyone, forget the auctioneer's roadside bazaars? Every weekday—weekends being taken up at the auction house—the trailer park lawn between old Lenny's place and Highway 14 became a veritable Midwestern Marrakesh, a half-acre of trash turned treasure, from hand tillers to collectible Santa plates to broken-in baseball mitts. It was the closest thing to a department store for many miles around, and its reputation rivaled that of even some of those department stores. Cars from several counties away, some even from out of state, could be found parked in a long line on the side of the highway on a summer day, their drivers and passengers ambulating through row upon row of gleaming wares, porcelain and aluminum glinting in the sun. Among the streams of potential buyers—for everyone was a potential buyer, Lenny said—was such a variety of people that the trailer park's lawn looked like a miniaturized Chicago on a Friday afternoon, minus the giant buildings, of course. And for those who somehow had not heard of old Lenny's ongoing sale, the spectacle that it created caught passers-by like the allure of a carnival. Heck, even Joe McCarthy stopped to shop there one time on his way from Madison to a Shakespeare play out at some country playhouse up among the hills of the driftless area. The senator showed a great sense of humor, buying a hammer and a small hand-scythe that he called a sickle and claiming with a wry grin that "capitalism is again victorious" as he handed over his payment. Old Lenny liked that guy. Maybe the senator had told all his friends in Washington about old Lenny's bazaar. Maybe JFK himself would show up and buy a Cuban cigar, all in secret, of course, now that there was an embargo.

"Well," Lenny's words brought Hayden out of his summer daydream, back into the winter trailer, "I also keep a few things for myself. I don't sell everything."

Hayden heard a twinge of guilt in old Lenny's voice that gave the statement an air of confession.

"You see, Hayden, I've got some heroes, like I said. You know those old serials that they show nowadays on television, the space adventure ones?"

"You mean like Tom Corbett? And Flash Gordon?"

"And Buck Rogers, yeah," a smile spread across Lenny's face.

"Well," Lenny readjusted himself in his seat, relaxing a bit. "These are my heroes. Call me strange, but I used to sneak into the movie theaters before they put those kind of shows on T.V. I think I was the only adult outside of the projection booth.

"I learned a lot from those heroes. Still do. One thing I learned about was being plucky—taking chances, no matter what the odds, jumping into the unknown."

Hayden spoke timidly, not wanting to offend him.

"But Mister Lenny, you've never been in danger like that."

"I . . ." Lenny stopped, stumped.

"Ah, look," he slowly opened the box. "I've got something for you."

The blocked coloring of the thing distracted Hayden from taking in its whole shape at once. Navy blue, matte gold, and bright red blocks drew his eye from spot to spot—blue on the right half, gold on the left, and three red bumps, one on either ear and one on the top of the helmet. It could have been a jet pilot's helmet, given the blue-glass visor that fit over the wearer's eyes. But the three red protuberances, surmounted by glass cones, each encrusted by a three-ring-encircled antenna, gave it a bizarre, otherworldly air, though "air" seemed to Hayden to be the wrong word.

"The H4000," Lenny said proudly, handing the helmet to the boy. Hayden rolled it around in his hands, admiring its solidity and clean workmanship, traits found less and less often in an increasingly industrialized age whose waning dedication to craftsmanship was apparent even to a teenage boy.

"I want you to have it," Lenny said, "with one condition."

Hayden looked up at him quizzically, but not nearly as quizzically as his mother, who walked out of the kitchen area and into the living area to see the gadget and register a faint protest.

"But we can't . . ." she began.

"Yes, you will," old Lenny insisted. Then, raising a cautionary finger, he said "But, as I said, there is a condition."

He set the box on the floor and sat back in his chair, letting the silence set the stage for his dramatic words. He spoke in a quiet, almost solemn voice.

"It is reputed," he said with as much of a wise tone as he could muster, "that the H4000 helmet has many functions. But one of those functions, Hayden, is to heal."

Tears started in Lydia's eyes. She wiped them away quickly, in an effort to be strong for her son.

"Hayden, you've got some great doctors over there in Madison that are going to take care of you. But those chemo-therapeutics," he struggled through the syllables, "are new medicine. So I'm giving you the H4000 as a booster to help you on your way. Wear it every night for at least twenty minutes a night before you go to the hospital. And be strong. Be plucky, and you're gonna make it through."

"I will, sir," Hayden said, wondering to himself why the word "sir" should come so readily while talking to old Lenny. Still, it seemed right, and when Lenny left there was an air—and this time "air" was the right word—an air of dignity about the man.

Lydia silently confirmed this with a hand on her son's shoulder and a whispered "thank you" as the auctioneer slipped out into the night.

April

The utter weakness brought on by his treatments left Hayden feeling small. His hair was beginning to grow back, but he felt that his soul had withered into remission along with the cancer. He was alive, but different, diminished somehow. His knees began to buckle as he stepped down

the front porch of his trailer, but he managed to keep upright by reminding himself that his father would not approve of him excusing himself, of giving up.

It was, he remembered, six years past that Sheriff Blakely stood on his doorstep speaking in soft tones to his mother, who offered a stoic "thank you, Sheriff," before gently closing the door, calmly walking to her room, and sitting, staring at a photo of his father, Gene, through the entire night. She dutifully tended to chores, meals, and dishes the next day, only shedding a tear when she sat down to eat and realized that she had, out of habit, set Gene's place. But Gene's plate would not be filled with food, nor his seat with him, again. So strong was her silent strength that the realization of his father's death didn't hit Hayden until the following morning, when the gaping maw of the empty carport snapped shut the jaws of finality.

He walked across the carport, still empty save for some oil stains from a leak that had dried up a long, long time ago. He tried to take meaning from the stains but, finding none, lifted his eyes to the bazaar.

Lenny and Simms stood there like twin sentinels, talking with each other, but barely moving. They were fixtures, as much as the bins of tools, piles of plates, and stacks of books and bric-a-brac laid out in orderly squares like garden plots growing second-hand bouquets of Bakelite and chrome. Between the rows bustled over a dozen people, emptied from half a dozen cars that were lined up on the side of the road like the metal segments of a gigantic caterpillar. The cars, combined with the brightly clothed people, formed scintillating jewels in the crown of old Lenny's market. Every once in a while one of the people would walk up to Lenny, haggle, exchange money for goods, and drive off, only to be replaced by a fresh car or two in a couple of minutes.

Hayden had a lot of time to watch this, since he was slower than usual and the men's backs were turned to him. He snuck up on them, hoping to hear in their private talk some heretofore hidden indication of the profound affection that he suspected each held for the other.

But he could have guessed that they would be arguing—respectfully, but arguing nonetheless—about some current event. He would have guessed right.

"We had no business being there, Lenny," Simms said, in consternation. "They had every right to rebel—they were being oppressed."

"Oppressed? You ever seen a postcard from Havana?"

Simms lowered his voice to a near whisper, exasperated and almost out of energy. "All those beautiful hotels you see in the postcards, Lenny, were built on the backs of the poor."

Hayden looked around at the trailer park, the conversation fading into background noise as he considered the poverty surrounding him. Simms was possibly the wealthiest person in the trailer park, and he was only a retired school teacher. At least he had a college degree, which qualified him as the most educated person in the park. Lenny was, obviously, completely uneducated, but he had work, of a sort, which was a far cry more than most men in the area. When Hayden's father died the unemployment rate in the park rose, but just barely.

Hayden looked at the shoppers mulling about Lenny's piles of junk—and it was mostly junk, the boy suddenly realized. He wondered why people would stop by the roadside to buy junk, then he noticed, as if his eyes had just been opened, that the highway shoppers were by no means the jet-set that Lenny claimed had frequented his bazaar from time to time. Sure, old Joe McCarthy had stopped there, but the senator's impromptu visit and purchase might just as well have been a photo opportunity as much as the product of an honest interest in Lenny's goods. He pictured a newspaper photo of the smiling senator with the caption "McCarthy Among the People," the "People" being a euphemism for the poor. Who knows how many votes the senator might have bought with such a picture?

No, these customers were average people—average in another community. They seemed a class above Simms, even, and they were just average people, nothing special. Even the Hispanic family looking at appliances drove a nicer car than anyone in the park, and the finish on their old Chevy was already showing signs of wear, paint chipping off the fins.

The old men's conversation came back to the boy, as if he were emerging from under water into the open air.

"... crazy spics running around with machine guns!" Lenny blurted out.

The Hispanic couple glared at him, somehow taking the toys out of their children's hands, setting the toys down gently, leading their children to the car, and getting them into the car without taking their eyes off of him.

Lenny smiled stupidly at them and waved, not wanting to offend a potential customer, even as they drove off. The other shoppers, all white, ignored the entire incident.

"Now see what you've done," Lenny blamed Simms. "I lost my customers because of you."

"Me?" Simms' voice had risen considerably from their earlier conversation. "You were the one using racial slurs! It's your ignorance that ..."

"My ignorance? Who are you to talk?"

Another couple ushered their children into their car.

"I've got a degree from the University of Iowa."

"Well," Lenny's bravado faded somewhat, "your university friends just smashed a spaceship into the far side of the moon."

"Those men, need I remind you, were hired by the same stupid government that backed those poor counter-revolutionaries being tried in Cuba, the same government that sent them as sacrificial lambs against a government that has every reason to be in power there!"

The walkways between the bazaar's rows of junk were becoming veritable exit-lanes for consumer traffic.

"If we hadn't supported the Bay of Pigs force, those men wouldn't be in the predicament they're in right now!"

"But they're commies down there!" Lenny retorted.

"Then send McCarthy's ghost to scare 'em out!" Simms threw his hands up in the air.

"Hey, I liked that guy," Lenny said in a voice that bespoke defeat. "Besides," he said in a suddenly apologetic tone, "I didn't mean what I said about those university guys. I don't think they smashed that spaceship

into the moon. I think something, or someone else out there didn't like us intruding on their territory, if you know what I mean."

Simms shook his head and walked away from Lenny, toward Hayden, who had taken a seat on a tree stump at the edge of the sale. He sat down beside the boy, watching as Lenny walked over to the highway to wave at passing travelers in an effort to convince them to stop and peruse his wares now that the first wave had retreated.

"This is all wrong," Simms said in a voice that portended much more than mere annoyance.

"You guys always fight," Hayden laughed a weak laugh.

"No, not Lenny," Simms said. Hayden admired the patience that Simms had regained in such a short amount of time. "It's Cuba I'm worried about. Things are heating up between us and them. It might be war again, and we're not yet fully recovered from Korea."

"You think it'll get that bad?" Hayden asked.

"I do."

"How do you know?" Hayden asked. Simms didn't miss the hint of cynicism in the boy's tone.

"Logic." He looked at Hayden searching for a reaction. The boy was too sick to give any outward indication of his thoughts.

"We try to invade Cuba with counter-revolutionaries. The counter-revolution fails dismally. We impose an embargo. They try the counter-revolutionaries, who will certainly be executed. A pattern is emerging, and I don't like where it's leading."

Hayden considered for a moment.

"You don't believe old Lenny, do you?"

"About what?"

"About Ranger 4."

"The spacecraft?"

"Yeah, the crash and all."

Simms smiled at the boy's naivety and at the boy's emerging understanding of the world.

"That some alien influenced the crash? No."

Hayden sat silently for a time, watching Lenny begin to pack up his crates of items. After several halting false-starts, he spoke.

"He was right, you know."

"About what?" Simms asked, suspicious.

"About the treatment. I think his helmet helped."

Simms smiled, stifling a laugh.

"The treatment was successful, Hayden. The procedure worked and now your cancer is in remission."

Hayden fidgeted, unwilling for a time to let the words come out of his mouth. Finally, he could hold back no longer.

"But," he paused momentarily, as if questioning himself, "but they said it only had a 15 percent chance of actually working."

Simms put his hand on Hayden's shoulder.

"Doctors are sometimes wrong. Because of that, they need to give out a low estimate on a new procedure's success rate. Otherwise they are legally liable. So they tell people that they are more likely to be wrong about

the procedure working. Thankfully, this time," Simms patted Hayden's back affectionately, "they were wrong in your favor."

The boy sat for what seemed like a long time, deep in thought.

"Maybe you're right, Mister Simms. Maybe you're right."

The sun glinted off some chrome object in old Lenny's hand just as he tucked it away in a cardboard box, the last item to be put away before the sun settled behind the hills. Hayden could have sworn it was a gun.

August

It was a ruse, but Doctor Simms Zarkov played the part brilliantly. Khrushchev the Merciless, Premier of Planet Mongo, looked over the Doctor's shoulder to see the phonograph-horn-shaped display that showed the video-feed from the cube-man army.

In a rocky cavern on the other side of Mongo, Lenny Gordon, entirely too plump for his tights, and Lydia Arden, dressed in a skirt so short it made her watching son shiver in fear of his Freudian excitement, stood with their backs to a blazing pit. Lava glowed from below, under-lighting the pair, making Lenny Gordon seem even more large and oafish, and revealing even more of Lydia's enticingly forbidden figure.

The cube-man army approached slowly, but inevitably, their segmented tubular legs shuffling in time with the flailing of their claw-appended, snake-like arms, limbs constricted by the awkward manner in which they were attached to their cubical bodies. Mongo's engineers were, it seemed, concerned primarily with utility, only secondarily with elegance.

Hayden wondered why Zarkov's video-image didn't sway from side to side, given the swaying of the cube-men's bodies.

Khrushchev reared back in a fit of laughter, unable to see a look of worry appear, with melodramatic swiftness, on Simms Zarkov's face. Lenny and Lydia, backing up to the pit blindly, slipped and fell into the fiery hole.

"Tune in next week . . ."

Hayden began to return to consciousness.

"Strings and sparklers!" he heard Simms saying. He kept his eyes closed.

"And how does Emperor Ming think he's going to conquer the universe with minions as fat as that?"

Hayden opened one eye and scanned for Lenny, who sat across from Simms. Lenny glared at Simms.

The old teacher rolled his eyes, but Lenny kept his gaze set on Simms.

"I thought you were smarter than that," Lenny said, with remarkable restraint.

Simms stopped in mid-eye roll, his mouth wide open. He stared at Lenny like a blackface actor playing "Sambo Caught by Surprise."

"Really," Lenny twisted the knife, "you should have known better than to be fooled by the sparks and the wires."

"But, I . . ." Simms protested.

"No, you were fooled like any fourth grader. You thought that the flash-

bang-zing was the important part of the show, so you make fun of it. You missed the point. If you wanted to make fun of something, you should have made fun of Flash Gordon's bravery, or the human concern of Doctor Zarkov for his friend. You were caught up in lights and camera tricks, but you missed the heart of the matter. The heart!"

"Oh, look, the news is on," Lydia interjected pleasantly, keeping the argument from escalating.

"... inquest into the death of actress Marilyn Monroe continues, with questions being raised about the apparent suicide ..." the TV newscaster spoke in near-monotone.

"That'll put JFK in a snit," Lenny quipped.

"... Mariner Two spacecraft is launched toward Venus, one month after Mariner One was destroyed by the range safety officer after the rocket veered off course. The aborted flight was thought ..."

"Bad omens," Lenny shook his head. "Just this morning, one of my tin walking robots started sparking and smoking, which it's supposed to do, then caught fire, which it's not."

"Omens?" Simms had recovered from Lenny's previous assault. "These things have nothing to do with each other."

Hayden spoke up. "You have to admit, though, it is pretty strange and all."

Simms seemed angry. "I don't have to admit anything of the sort. There is absolutely no connection between a floozy's suicide, bad telemetry, and a poorly built toy taking fire!"

Hayden was hurt by the tone of Simms' voice, and it showed on the boy's face.

Simms lowered his voice, but did not back down. "Look, bad things happen, sometimes in rapid succession, it's a chaotic universe we live in. But to connect all these things is entirely illogical. It's just a way for your mind to compartmentalize uncomfortable things so they're easier to deal with."

"So logic is a fake cage around your thoughts, like the wires on Flash Gordon?" Hayden challenged the teacher

Simms began to speak, but Hayden continued. "When I was healing," he looked toward the door to his little bedroom, behind which the H4000 helmet was kept, "I heard voices, transmissions. Not in English or Russian or Spanish. I, I can't explain," he paused, looking bewildered. "Another language. I didn't understand all the words, but I understood the feeling. And it made me scared." He turned to look at Lenny. "They don't want us going out there, into space."

The others waited for him to continue.

"As I got better, when the cancer went into remission, I heard them less and less."

"Son," Simms said, "you were under a lot of stress back then, your mind ..."

"The transmissions," Hayden interrupted, "the voices, they're coming back. They don't want us out there." He stood, then went into his room. The last thing the others could see was Hayden reaching for the helmet as he closed the door with his foot.

The newscast droned on for a moment as the remaining three avoided eye contact with each other. Finally, Lydia spoke in a soft voice.

"Mr. Simms, Lenny. The doctors told us last week that the cancer is back. It will be three full months before they can get him back in for treatments."

Simms thought on the heart of the matter as he walked home.

Lenny thought of the comfort of a cage made with logical wires.

Hayden donned the H4000 helmet and listened. The voices became more and more clear with each passing day.

September

It was warm, so far as late September in Wisconsin went. Still, the trees smelled a little different, as if they were warming themselves up and sweating one last time before their autumn rest. The water in the creek out behind the trailer park was colder than it had been all summer. Perhaps winter would seep up from the ground, Hades' icy grip reaching up from the dirt to claw away the balmy winds from the south.

Simms was more relaxed than Hayden had ever seen him before. The old teacher might have been sleeping. His hat was low, almost covering his thin-lidded eyes.

Occasionally, Hayden would look past the worm that he was busy threading on a hook and notice that Simms' eyes would move, lazily following the bobber that floated on a slow spot in the creek. When Simms finally spoke, it startled the boy so much that he nearly hooked his finger.

"You probably think your mother asked me to take you fishing."

"I probably do," Hayden's voice hinted of world-weariness. He sucked the blood out of the tiny hole in his finger.

"Sorry," Simms shifted to his side, the hat spilling on the bank to reveal his smiling face, "this wasn't your mother's idea."

For some reason that he couldn't identify, Hayden was pleased with this fact. He smiled and cast his line into the water with a plunk.

"And I'm not trying to get your mind off your illness, either." Simms shot a glance at Hayden to see his response. He took the boy's silence as an all-clear to speak openly.

"No, I think you should tackle the cancer head-on. Of course, you can't cure yourself," he paused, noting that Hayden was fidgeting uneasily. He suspected the boy's discomfort had little to do with the hook wound. "But you can go on living."

Hayden's brow furrowed, deep in thought.

"This is an amazing time to be alive, Hayden. After all our best efforts to egg on the Soviets, they're saying that there's no reason to put missiles up in Cuba. If Kennedy's a smart man, and I think he is, he'll pull our missiles out of Turkey and find a way to convince East Germany to bring down the wall. Think about it, world peace. Maybe this whole Cuban

thing was a blessing in disguise, something to get our minds off of Berlin and get us talking to each other."

He stopped, guessing that Hayden was becoming bored with the political banter.

"And did you hear the news yesterday? President Kennedy said that we'll put a man on the Moon by the end of the decade." He grew wistful and a touch misty-eyed. "I wish your father was here to see it."

Hayden turned to look at him as if suddenly woken out of a sleep-walking episode.

"Yeah," Hayden said, looking up into the blue sky, "I wish he was here to see it, too."

"But he's not," Simms said in a matter of fact voice.

A surge of anger rose in Hayden. Simms saw it in the sudden stiffening of the boy's body, the flush of red in his young cheeks.

"Yes," Simms smiled, "you've got fight in you! That's good. Now you've got to keep that fighting spirit. You've got to fight to stay alive, son!"

Hayden sat utterly confounded with frustration and flattery.

"It's what your father would have wanted from you," Simms said.

A tug and a splash announced to the pair that a trout had been caught on Hayden's line. He quickly reeled in the fish and, after watching it struggle for air for a few brief moments, un-hooked it and gently put it back in the creek, slowly moving it back and forth to force water through its gills. He had never put a caught trout back in the creek before. It filled him with a thrilling lightness of being when the fish began to thrash, then darted off into deeper water.

October

The raygun's erstwhile chrome-plated shine had dulled with time. The metal was scratched and pitted, the Buck Rogers logo barely recognizable as such, as if etched by the impurities of the old black and white film cells in which the original made its appearances.

"The XZ-38 pistol," Lenny proclaimed with solemnity.

Hayden lifted the gun up, aiming it at the window of Lenny's trailer. The warm smell of gunpowder wafted up from the cap gun. He slowly squeezed the trigger . . .

"Careful!" Lenny ripped the gun from the boy's hand. "You don't know what that thing is capable of!"

"But it's just a cap gun," Hayden said in frustration.

Lenny gave him a sidelong glare, and Hayden instantly regretted his words. The scent of the gunpowder, along with the way that Lenny had looked at him, left Hayden feeling wary and ill at ease.

"Here. Try this. It's heavier, might make you think twice before pulling the trigger."

The old man reached into a small box that sat at his feet. He pulled out a bulbous raygun, also made of die-cast metal, like the XZ-38. He handed it to his young compatriot.

Hayden reached out and took the gun by its bright red handle. It was substantial, its heft surprising, even for a metal toy of its size. Cogs, a rectangular-block heat sink, and a semi-circular indicator gauge on the side of the gun gave it an industrial look, like something the Soviets would make. The indicator arrow pointed to just below "400" on the 500-unit scale. He wondered what that meant, and decided that the implications were too ominous to test indoors. He rolled the gun over in his hand and read the raised letters on the side.

"Atomic Disintegrator. What's it do?"

Lenny looked at the gun as if he were sizing up a rattlesnake or eyeing a cup of poison. "Just what it says it does. You be careful with that thing, hear? Thought I'd give it to you as a gift, a confidence booster. But don't get overconfident, or you'll boost your mom's kitchen into oblivion. Speaking of which, I should be getting you home."

They walked slowly across the trailer park lawn, savoring the coolness of the autumnal air.

"So how's this thing supposed to boost my confidence?" Hayden asked, still testing the weight of the disintegrator.

"It's a focus for your faith, Hayden. I know you've got a lot of faith, but sometimes faith needs a boost, a little something to believe in. You're going to need it when your Martians finally get fed up with all the space junk we're throwing at them."

"My Martians?"

"They're on your bubblegum cards."

Hayden's face screwed up into a perplexed half-smile.

"You really think they're coming, don't you, Mister Lenny?"

Lenny smiled. "Call it a premonition. Call it a sinister faith. They'll be here." The smile faded with the last proclamation.

A yell erupted from a nearby trailer, startling the pair and causing visions of marauding Martians to flood into Hayden's mind.

"Lenny! Hayden!" It was Simms, and he was more worked up than either of the two had ever seen him. "Quick! Get inside!" Simms grabbed both of them by the arm, ushering them toward Hayden's trailer as quickly as he could, given his aged legs and Lenny's bulk. He didn't even knock, just barged right in through the front door yelling "turn the TV on!" to which Lydia responded with more consternation than Hayden had thought possible from her. "I see it, Mister Simms! It's already on, now pipe down!"

Lenny was annoyed. "What the Sam Hill are you people on about? It can't . . . uh-oh."

President Kennedy spoke into a battery of microphones. He looked like he hadn't slept in days.

". . . in addition, jet bombers, capable of carrying nuclear weapons, are now being uncrated and assembled in Cuba, while the necessary air bases are being prepared."

The television flickered and fuzzed. For a brief moment, through the static, the nearly incomprehensible outline of a head flashed on screen, the quickly fading features of its latent image superimposed over the president's face.

"Khrushchev!" Simms blurted out.

"The Martians!" Lenny gasped.

"... neither the United States of America nor the world community of nations can tolerate deliberate deception and offensive threats on the part of any nation ..."

The picture blurred again.

"The Soviets are jamming the transmissions," Simms said, more calmly than before. "That's the first sign of impending war, jamming communications."

"It's not the Russkies," Lenny said. "That ... thing was not Khrushchev, or any other human."

"I didn't see anything in particular," Lydia said. She walked up to the television and banged on its side.

Hayden grabbed his head. A dull ache had begun when he sat down, and the banging felt like nails being driven into his temple.

"What do you think, Hayden?" Lenny asked as Lydia banged the TV into clarity.

"I don't know, I ..."

"Shh!" Simms tried to quiet them.

"... greatest danger of all would be to do nothing. The path we have chosen for the present is full of hazards, as all paths are. But it is the one most consistent with our character and courage as a nation and our commitments around the world. The cost of freedom is always high—and Americans have always paid it. And one path we shall never choose, and that is the path of surrender or submission. Our goal is not ..."

Again the picture broke up. Lenny and Simms squinted, trying to decipher the indistinct shape that may or may not have appeared behind the snow. Hayden squinted in pain, pressing the heels of his hands into his temples, trying to massage away the pressure in his head. He suddenly stopped, his eyes widening, lips parting, his breathing rapid, panting.

Simms noticed him first. "Hayden, what's wrong?" He looked to the screen, then back to Hayden. "What do you see?"

"I see ..." Hayden began to cry.

Lenny cut in "Don't do that to the boy ..." He turned the TV off, then sat back in the chair.

"I see ..." Hayden continued, not hearing Lenny "... the cancer."

He broke into sobbing. Lydia walked to where he was, knelt down beside him, and held him as he shook from crying.

Simms and Lenny looked at each other, unsure of what to do. They stood at the same time, preparing to leave. But as Lenny headed for the door, Simms broke rank and walked over to Lydia and Hayden. He put his hand on Lydia's shoulder, trying to console her. The mother and child trembled together so that neither Simms nor Lenny, who had stopped with his hand on the door to watch the touching scene, could tell which was weeping and which was comforting.

"Lydia," Simms said softly, "let's all go out for a walk."

She nodded, sniffing, then rose with Hayden. Lenny held the door open as the three of them, Lydia, Hayden, and Simms, walked outside into the night. The air was cool, but calm. The waxing crescent moon was lit from the underside like an immense celestial lantern with the shade barely opened.

Lenny took up the rear as they walked out on to the highway, heading southeast through the low hills. The autumn leaves, still attached to the trees, occasionally shifted with a steady, smooth breeze that increased the further they walked, shuffling like a dossier of secret papers about to be revealed to the world, the impending revelation of the menace that would bring on the apocalypse, be it nuclear, extraterrestrial, or cell-borne.

They came upon a flat area, a recently harvested cornfield by a bend in the road where the night sky opened its expanse to their eyes.

They stopped and looked up. Two dozen or more faint white lines streaked the sky from northeast to southwest, like Lucifer's claw marks on the face of God.

"Contrails," Simms said. "B-52s, no doubt, flying from Minot to Havana. That could be the beginning of the end."

They looked toward the southern horizon, trying to discern the planes' lights from the stars, but they were camouflaged by the light pollution glowing up from Milwaukee and Chicago.

"I suppose," said Lenny, unable to hide the amusement in his voice, "that one of us should say something profound."

Hayden grew dizzy, unsure if the sensation came from the vastness of the universe or from some failure of his proper body function due to the disease that was eating him from the inside out. His mother steadied him with her hands on his shoulders.

A car horn in the distance broke the silence. The sound of an engine whined higher as the vehicle approached. By the time the car whipped around the bend, the only noise louder than the car was the yelling of the vehicle's occupants, half a dozen college-age kids screaming the Wisconsin fight song while swerving across all the lanes of the highway. A pair of beer cans, thrown from the car, clattered on the road and into the cornfield as the noise faded off into the distance.

"Stupid kids," Simms said. "They won't know what hit them when it comes."

"When *they* come," Lenny corrected him.

Hayden groaned, putting a hand on his head.

Lydia spoke for the first time since they left her trailer. "They might not have long to wait."

The other three turned their gaze to her, then followed her pointing finger to a pulsating group of lights high in the air, approaching from the direction of the contrails' ultimate destination. The lights grew brighter, the moments stretching to lifetimes.^z

Hayden wondered if the cancer was affecting his sight, wondered if this is what it feels like when you are about to die.

Lenny, still looking at the lights, turned his head just enough that Hayden knew that it was he that the old man was speaking to.

"You got that gun, boy?"

Hayden pulled the Atomic Disintegrator pistol out from his belt, where he had tucked it away earlier. It felt warm, humming and sparkling with energy, as if it were coming alive in his hand.

The lights continued their approach. ○

BENEATH SUNLIT SHALLOWS

Derek Künsken

Derek Künsken built engineered viruses in graduate school before switching careers to work with street children in Central America. After spending five years in Colombia and Cuba working for the Canadian government, he now calls Ottawa home and writes around parenting activities. Derek has sold stories to *On Spec* and *Black Gate*. This devastating look at some of the potential consequences of genetic engineering is his first sale to *Asimov's*.

Vincent dreamed again that he swam behind a child-like Merced, out of the cold dark, rising toward an unknown sun. He didn't see the sun, which could only penetrate two hundred meters of water. He wanted, the way one does in dreams, to see it, ignoring the fact that if he saw even its depth-attenuated blue light, he would already be dead. The dream ended inconclusively and he dreamed inconsequential things. When he woke, he remembered the first dream as if his waking had cut the ending. It had been a long time since he'd thought of Merced. She'd been his best friend, but memories of her only reminded him of how he'd never been brave enough to follow her.

His room was black and cool. He felt the heating coils, not by their warmth, but by the electric current and the way they bent the local magnetic field. The electrical sense, for all that he'd been born with it, felt strange, off angle, while his sight always seemed to be the first thing he turned to when waking.

Don't trust instinct, he'd been told all his life.

His eyes yawned, seeing nothing. Beneath layers of blubber and muscle and rib lay two columns of muscular disks called electroplaques. Plagiarized from electrical eels, they stored electrical charge. Vincent sent a weak current along his left electroplaque. A sensor in the wall detected the change and lit the clear water of his room, showing flakes of white silt.

His tired gills churned. Months might pass before his blood adapted to the oxygen starvation of the ocean floor. They'd told him not to rush, to adapt to his new home slowly, but that's not why he nearly returned to sleep. Loneliness gnawed at him. Indecision exhausted him.

He felt something odd in his right side and shrugged at it. It was more than a twinge. He pushed a charge through the electroplaque under his ribs and found an unexpected resistance under his skin.

To protect him from the intense cold of the alien ocean floor, Vincent's designers had left room in the blubber layer to retract his arms into its warmth. That was how he slept, and he now pushed his arms out and felt around his torso. The thick skin, engineered from walrus and shark DNA, slid under his fingers. At first, he found nothing more than a film of algae, a hygienic faux pas, but over his ribs, he found a lump that hadn't been there a month ago.

He'd spent the last month descending through layers of ocean. The magnetic field shifted direction and strength slightly at each depth. He hadn't become used to any single pattern long enough to notice changes within himself. Until today. No more moving. It was day thirty of the move, day one on the floor, but only a fraction of the interminable night of his life. The feeling that he was a coward rose again.

Beneath the mottled grey skin of his forehead, instinct tried to frown, but the massive engineered scalp immobilized inadequate muscles. He twisted his inexpressive face to look at the blubbery rib cage. He couldn't see anything. He'd check himself with the CAT scan later.

Although they'd been designed to thrive in the benthic zones of the ocean, there was a chance that one organ or another had herniated because of some pressure imbalance. He stretched, chubby grey arms wide, blunt head back, flukes twisting and extended, gills open enough to eat a fish. He knew he was a monster, but he didn't have the courage he needed.

Vincent spent a lot of time thinking about the people whose decisions had, generation after generation, put him at the bottom of the ocean of the world they'd named Indi's Tear. He could not sum the series of seemingly well-intentioned choices with a result he clearly considered immoral. Where was the breakdown? He thought he knew where to lay the blame, but was blame even meaningful?

Vincent regarded the colonists who left Earth as crazy, but didn't think that they had crossed any ethical line. Earth had successfully launched many colony ships. The one to Epsilon Indi was certainly among the most ambitious, but they were trusting proven technology and skills. The risk was acceptable. Vincent was even prepared to accept as ethical the decision to permanently cut off their future descendants from Earth. No matter which way you looked at it, any trip that took more than a thousand years was a one-way trip. Most of the original colonists had died of old age before they'd even left the solar system.

But their children and grandchildren, who now ran the colony ship, were still human, even if they'd never see Earth again, or any humans other than the ones they'd brought with them. He felt that there was a lot of weight in that choice, but accepted it as reasonable, even responsible. He

understood the argument that the farther humans colonized, the more likely that they as a species, a culture, and a civilization would persist.

The door slid into the wall and Vincent left his room. He was shocked by water so cold that only pressure kept it from freezing. A snap of his body propelled him into the middle of the dark camp. No lights were on, which meant that Renald and Amanda hadn't yet risen, but that wasn't surprising. It was early yet.

He didn't need light anyway. He navigated as an electric eel or fish would, orienting himself by the way the camp equipment distorted the planet's magnetic field. He glided over the powdered sediment floor of the ocean, grabbing a hand lamp from a pile of boxes. Without lighting it, he surged ahead, leaving the cluster of cylinder shelters and containers.

Chill water squeezed through his gills, offering little oxygen, but his hyperactive hemoglobins seized even the trace amounts. The water held other scents. He smelled the stale odor of sand mixed with carbon dioxide, the stink of decaying amides and the taint of sulfur as he approached the smoker.

He switched on the light as he felt the water get warmer. It lit the white ocean floor and a lumpy reddish-black tube of rocky mineral deposits that thrust five meters out of the sand. It was called a smoker, and they'd surrounded and penetrated it with wires. One hundred and fifteen degree water burned out the top, rippling against the dark, benthic world. An algae-coated turbine in the smoker provided the limited power for their settlement. It would be months and years before they could build a full geothermal plant.

Robots crept in and around the superheated water, culling worms, clams, and little lobsters. The harvest required prodigious processing to remove toxic minerals and heavy metals, but the eventual slush was to be a staple of their ocean-floor diet. Once more electricity was available, they would grow modified plankton in deep sea greenhouses. It was difficult to imagine food more revolting than what they'd eaten growing up, yet here he didn't need to imagine. Vincent flexed away, gliding farther afield.

He left the light on, following the depressing endlessness of sand. Ahead of him, he saw a dim glow and felt an electrical disturbance. Bait. A dozen fine-meshed cages stood on mounds of sand. Inside each one hung a rolled metal screen covered in bioluminescent bacteria. Their light was fuzzy, as if out of focus, mostly blue, but some patches hazing to lime. The color didn't really matter. Any light would draw deep ocean fish.

Two of the traps had sprung. In the first trap, expressionless black eyes similar to his own regarded him from over serrated, bony lips. The scaled body was spiny and thin, mottled by some filamentous, fungal infection. It beat against the cage, reacting to Vincent's lamp. The second trap had caught a transparent ball covered with fine threads.

Both animals were native to Indi's Tear and were unfortunately edible, meaning that they weren't toxic, but weren't wholly digestible either. Some of the amino acids in the animals and plants of Indi's Tear were identical to those in Vincent's body. Others were different, but digestible.

But there were enough amino acids that couldn't be metabolized that each meal fulfilled a sickening, cramping promise.

He returned the catch to camp, but arrived short of breath. His large gills churned, sucking chill water, scavenging oxygen. There would never be more oxygen at the bottom of the ocean than there was now, and he knew his body wouldn't adapt until it was forced. But the suffocation worsened. His heart beat faster and he felt himself dizzying.

He waited, but, finally, he swam to the wall of the main building and fitted his face into a mask-shaped hollow. A stream of oxygenated water poured out of the emergency station, and the pressure on his chest slowly abated. He thought that maybe today he would have the courage he needed.

Vincent supposed that those who had arrived at the star Epsilon Indi, after a voyage of eleven hundred years, were still human. A millennium was too short a period of isolation to produce a new species, but he found it telling that he had to ask the question. Humanity had to be more than biological compatibility. What referents could a town of colonists share with humans on Earth if they'd spent thirty-seven generations in a steel cylinder, never seeing sun or moon, never feeling wind?

But he pitied those colonists in their metal case. He couldn't imagine the communal and cultural horror of looking through their telescopes and seeing Indi's Eye, their destination planet, devastated by a hit from a rogue moon. They couldn't turn around. They couldn't change course. They'd accelerated in Earth's solar system on disposable boosters and carried enough fuel to brake at their destination, eleven hundred years later.

Did they understand that they were a population whose death was only a formality? He guessed that they didn't. Otherwise their choices would have been not only unethical, but deliberately cruel.

Too exhausted to wash, he moved to the side doorway of the shelter and swam through. The dim lights that lit for his entry seemed overbright. His huge eyes had been designed a generation earlier, a preliminary step to humanity's expansion to the deeper ocean of Indi's Tear. The water inside was three or four degrees warmer, and oxygenated to simulate the rich upper ocean where he'd grown up.

Vincent couldn't stomach the thought of breakfast and went to his workstation. A network of sonar stations that transmitted in frequencies Vincent couldn't hear connected the fifteen aquatic communities on Indi's Tear and this camp. The nearest was Charlotte's Web, the town of four hundred souls where Vincent, Amanda, and Renald had grown up. It floated five hundred meters below the surface of the ocean and exactly two kilometers above where Vincent was now. Two messages waited on his desktop.

He opened the first. An electrical echo formed, invisible to ears, eyes and smell, but leaving a faint tangy taste in the water and a clean image in his electrical receptors. It was a likeness of his lawyer perceived through his electric organs. Tiny crackles of static discharged from the

display: language, borrowed conceptually from dolphins, but electrical instead of acoustic. It was a recording of his lawyer's electrical voice.

"Vincent, I've spoken with the prosecutor and convinced him not to press charges. Given your current service to the community and the impossibility of re-offending, we've agreed that it would be a waste of time. Congratulations."

The electrical image faded. Vincent felt nothing. He hadn't been worried.

The next message was in text. The faint blue letters were from his psychiatrist. He'd listed some times when Vincent could call for his mandatory therapy. One of them was now. Vincent's inexpressive face sucked water. He chattered electrically to the sensor and the call was made. He might as well get it done—it would only take half an hour.

The psychiatrist answered and an electrical image formed. The face was less fishlike, more human, more flexible and evocative. Vincent had seen the psychiatrist many times and knew that the image forming, although mostly correct, wasn't accurate. It was a psychiatrist trick, using hints of what humans used to look like to trigger positive emotional responses in patients.

"Vincent," the doctor said, "congratulations on reaching the bottom."

The image formed something like a smile. Vincent felt himself react to the artifice, but beat down the feeling. The doctor was as incapable of smiling as Vincent, but his communication system was programmed to alter the image, evoking reactions locked into thousands of generations of human evolution, recalling shadows of joy.

"I didn't do anything special," Vincent said. "We just sank for a month."

"You underestimate your accomplishment. The whole town is ecstatic."

The doctor waited, but Vincent was determined not to cooperate today.

"How are the others?" the doctor asked finally.

"Still asleep."

"And on the trip?"

"Same old irritating."

"They aren't like you," the doctor said. "They aren't as talented, or as independent as you are. Everything that comes hard to everyone else comes easy to you. They look up to you, even Renald, who wishes he were more like you." The psychiatrist paused, trying to pry a response from Vincent with silence. Vincent was quiet. "I don't think they understand why you won't speak to them," the psychiatrist finished.

"They know why. Whether they choose to understand is their problem."

"You hurt a lot of people with your principles, Vincent, including yourself. Part of life is about understanding how to balance a moral stand with other things that are important. None of us chose to come to Epsilon Indi. We're living the consequences of decisions made by our ancestors. We're just trying to survive."

"I'm not bringing children into the world who have to live like this."

"You won't be separated from your children, Vincent."

"I won't have any."

"You don't have the right to decide that. We're trying to survive as a species."

"What species? *Homo sapiens*? They're on Earth and colonizing other planets. *Homo indis*? We're not even one species. We're *costalis*, *pelagius* and now *benthus*. How many limping, pathetic things have to suffer through short lives so we can say we succeeded?"

"Have you dreamed of Merced again?"

Vincent felt himself gulping for oxygen, gills churning. Anger was a hormonal state that didn't mesh with the hemoglobins modified for deep sea survival. Genetic engineers would modify either the hemoglobins or the hormones in the next generation of *Homo sapiens benthus* to avoid this problem, but Vincent, Amanda, and Renald were stuck with it. Vincent also guessed that the change would cause other problems that were just as likely to wipe out dozens of embryos or babies. Vincent calmed himself, but it was an artificial solution.

"No," he said.

The psychiatrist paused, waiting for more. "It appears your wishes in the end will be respected and they won't even press charges," the doctor said finally.

"I knew they couldn't press charges. They need me. They would have tolerated far worse."

"Destroying your stored germ lines deprived society of other safe successes."

"I'm not a success! You're not a success. We're successful relative to miserable, painful failures. We're awful."

"Do you still have a plan?"

"What?"

"Do you still have a plan to kill yourself?"

Vincent filled the room with silence for a meaningful, revealing time.

"Of course I do," he said. Then he cut the connection.

He huffed at his anger, his gills flexing. This was only the most recent of a lifetime of unpleasant conversations. He'd chosen at some point not to take them personally. These conversations were very much about him and very much not about him.

The colonists arriving at Epsilon Indi had weighed their options and picked the only one that made any sense. There was too much debris orbiting Indi's Eye to set up orbital habitats, but the same amount of fuel could stop them at Indi's Tear, a heavier, colder world, farther from the dim star. They set up an orbital colony there and set out to weigh their next steps. The asteroid that struck next was not thought to be more than sixty centimeters in diameter, but had been traveling at better than twenty-six kilometers per second. It killed half the orbiting community instantly. It was also not alone. There was far more debris in the system than they'd guessed. The only thing that could protect them from most of the impacts was a thick atmosphere, like the one on the world beneath them. So they'd abandoned their habitat and descended to the chill surface of Indi's Tear, despite its three crushing gravities.

Vincent left the habitat, gliding into the cold, anoxic darkness. The currents had shifted and, unfortunately, he smelled a nearby kitchen. He

glided toward a cylindrical habitat set away from their compound and the smell intensified. The door of the habitat slid away as he approached and he passed into the concentrated stink of fishy nitrogen compounds and sulfur. In sealed boxes incapable of containing the smell were the slurries and pastes of the catches made yesterday by robots. Although they were ground to mush and leached of heavy metals, most of the cramping minerals, and sulfur, they were still repellent.

The first box had his name on it and he pulled it from the shelf with his hands. It was slick with a bacterial growth on the outside, but he set it on the table and opened it. He could not close his eyes or escape the smell. His jaws opened with designed efficiency, and he shoveled the slurry in, gulping clumps around a gag reflex his designers hoped to remove in the next generation. The cartilaginous grounds lodged under his tongue and at the edges of his throat. The handfuls of sulfurous flesh were like bite after bite of rotting eggs. He emptied the box without vomiting, but the bloated queasiness that accompanied every feeding lurched in him.

His stomach gurgled and twisted. The bacteria in his gut had been modified to metabolize and neutralize the sulfur, and he swore, as he always did, that he could feel them work. These bacteria were nearly as critical to his survival as his other adaptations, because they carried enzymes that would digest some of the strange amino acids of Indi's Tear, increasing the caloric value of food by almost 40 percent. Newborns had to be fed special cultures that sometimes didn't take to their intestinal tracts. When they didn't, the newborns were euthanized. It was so difficult to survive that the towns had no flexibility to even try to keep the weak alive.

Thoughts of newborns saddened yet satisfied him. In Charlotte's Web, he'd entered the storehouse that held his germ cell stocks and had set them adrift in the ocean. They'd charged him with a crime, but had not dared convict him. He was irreplaceable and, as an adult, he would not let them take any more sperm. They could not use him or his genes for any further failed generations of sacrificial litters. The line of descent and inserted genes that connected Vincent through all his ancestors, back through all of evolution to the dawn of life on Earth, would stop with him. Someone had to say stop. All he had to do was follow Merced, and it frightened him that today he might have the courage.

It was not long before the new inhabitants of Indi's Tear had started dying. Fewer meteors reached the surface, but those that did devastated. And three gravities, every hour of every day, was too much. Every task made them dizzy. Every fall broke a bone. Exhausted hearts failed in young and old. Only immersion in water made the fierce gravity bearable. They took to the coastal shallows at first, layered with survival equipment. But this was a temporary solution. Human skin was not built for constant soaking. They became diseased.

Even though no one knew how to genetically modify adults, they could tinker with fertilized eggs. They could try to spare them the ravages of gravity and the rotting diseases of the skin. Mostly they failed.

At first, the changes were small. They had carried the complete DNA

sequences of hundreds of thousands of species from Earth with which to terraform and colonize Indi's Eye. They used these on their offspring, toughening and thickening the skin with artificial chromosomes made from walrus and seal DNA and layering fat beneath that skin to keep them warmer. Even so, engineering a new kind of human was a complex thing. Many new genes interfered with one another. For years they had nothing but spontaneous abortions until they figured out how to modify all the genes being interfered with.

Then infants started to survive.

But they'd crossed a line. The children of this new generation were still air-breathing mammals, but they were a new species. With an extra pair of chromosomes and hundreds of modified genes, there was no chance of a successful mating with *Homo sapiens*. *Homo indis* was born.

And the line was more than biological. They'd planted a permanent barrier, cultural and emotional, between the two generations. Family and parenting as practiced by *Homo sapiens* was meaningless in this new context. The gene swapping involved in success meant that those new children belonged both to no one and to everyone. Direct lineage, the unbroken line of descent from parent to offspring that ran from the origin of life to the shores of the oceans of Indi's Tear, ended.

Lack of belonging and descent colored other perceptions. Although the new babies were grown in artificial litters of fifty, only a fraction survived. No one would, or could, invest their emotions in things that were not theirs and were likely to die.

Beauty and sexuality also separated the generations. These new creatures, *Homo indis*, were hideous to their many parents, and to themselves. The broad standards of beauty, the mate recognition hardware in mammals, were evolved through thousands of generations of gradual change. The genetic engineers had no idea of how it worked or how to change it, and the longing for physical beauty became a torment. In a practical sense, it didn't matter. The *Homo indis* could not reproduce without technological assistance.

No one foresaw the consequences beyond the goal of this genetic tinkering. Their choices seemed eminently reasonable, if influenced by desperation.

Before Amanda opened the door, Vincent felt her electrical signature, the unique pattern of moving charge associated with her. This level of discernment, being able to distinguish one person from another by electrical sense only, was unique to Vincent among the *Homo indis*.

Amanda slid in and he felt his contempt rise, like the breakfast he'd eaten an hour ago. Since childhood, he'd watched her flounder in every subject in school. She was vacuous and missed the implications of almost every conversation he'd ever had with her. But she was here, for the same reason that he was: she'd survived to maturity. What little pride he took in his abilities and his role in the community bled away in her presence.

"Good morning, Vincent," she said in lumpy electrical echoes. Her speech was atonal. She had nothing of the musical inflections he used to nuance even his most careless statements. "How long have you been up?"

"Less than an hour."

"It feels strange being this deep, finally being away from home."

Nothing she said was wrong, but her presence grated.

"Do you feel the same, Vincent?"

Contempt welled. She knew he could barely stomach her, but she still needed his approval, the approval of others. She was a shell of a person, waiting to be defined, rated, and assigned a role. He fantasized about leaving her alone for months or years. However long the solitude took to give her an identity. He wanted desperately for her to be someone he respected. He didn't speak, but swam away from her, toward the lab. She followed him, as he knew she would.

They became better at reproducing. By the time the last of the *Homo sapiens* had died, the *Homo indis* had established themselves in murky river zones and along coastlines. They mastered the engineering skills of their dead ancestors. Every generation modified the next, racing against time to spread themselves wherever they could survive. It was now part of their culture. The costs were acceptable, normal.

Meteors rained onto Indi's Tear. *Homo indis* spread to different continents to minimize their chances of extinction, but even at that, coastal shallows were a grim place to weather the tsunamis following an asteroid impact. The *Homo indis* were almost wiped out. They fled again, modifying themselves into true water-breathers to colonize the upper layers of the open sea, becoming *Homo indis pelagius*. But even here, they were not safe. They worried and watched the sky, for the impact that would be inescapable.

It was nearly twelve hours later that Renald and Amanda entered the lab for the third time to see how Vincent was doing. Vincent had taken scans and biopsies of all three of them in the morning and now floated in front of screens of data. He turned as they stopped behind him.

Renald was slightly bigger than Vincent, with pale, mottled skin stretched over fatty flesh. He tended to defer to Vincent, but not for lack of competence. Renald had never tried very hard, leaving most problems for Vincent, because everyone knew Vincent was the best. Renald's large, expressionless face, framed by slowly pulsing gills and centered under bulbous black eyes, perused the medical scans.

"It's not an infection," Vincent said to him. "It looks like cancer, pre-metastatic, many different kinds, all forming now."

"What does it mean?" Amanda asked. She hadn't Vincent's or Renald's training in molecular biology. She was a technician and mechanic, and not even a good one at that. "Is this something else that they didn't see in our generation?"

Her meaning was clear. They three were the only survivors of a litter of fifty of the new subspecies *Homo indis benthus*, engineered to live on the floor of the ocean. None of the four preceding litters had survived.

It was a tricky thing, redesigning the development of a whole being. Growth factors, gravity, nutrient concentration, temperature, and pressure interacted with some sixty thousand human genes to produce a per-

son. The complexities of neurology still escaped the genetic engineers, which was why Vincent and the others still ached for human food, human smells, human sights, and human beauty. These were hardwired by hundreds of thousands of years of evolution.

"I don't think so," Vincent said. "If it was something designed wrong, we would have found it before now and we'd probably all have the same cancer."

Vincent knew Renald had also guessed the cause as well.

"The change in pressure we've gone through over the last month has been enormous," Vincent said. "Thousands of proteins in our bodies have been modified so as not to change shape because of the pressure, but it was suspected that there might be some gene products we wouldn't know about, like alternate splices or undiscovered post-translational modifications. You only need a couple dozen of these unknowns to explain all our cancers."

"What does it mean?" Amanda asked.

"It means our gene engineers have screwed up and that our lives have been thrown away for nothing," Vincent said. "It means we head back up to town. The pressure change may solve the problem and we can live the rest of our lives with our friends. The next generation can live on the bottom of the ocean, if they decide to keep pushing this stupid plan."

Vincent observed Renald, not with his eyes, because they could discern no more emotion from Renald's face than he could from a carp's. He listened to the electrical pulses, shielding his own. Renald obviously disagreed with him, but they'd retread those arguments many times. Vincent doubted Renald was interested in repeating them today. But Amanda had no notion of social politics and the concept of unwinnable battles.

"None of us should be here, Vincent," she said. "The colonists couldn't have known."

"I don't blame the colonists for arriving," he said. "I blame them for sacrificing the humanity of their children. They didn't have to live with the consequences. We did and we do. This is not life. It's purgatory, for us and all our children."

"You have the choice they had, Vincent," Renald said. "You have the choice of letting this cancer kill you."

"You know what my choice is," Vincent snapped. "No more speciation. No more separation of family and friends. We take what we have and build on that. No more of this," he said, waving his fatty, gray arm wide. "Is this your dream? Spending the rest of your life on the bottom of the ocean with me and Amanda?"

"We're better off than those who didn't make it," Renald said.

"Are we?"

Renald did not reply and left, his swishing tail fin driving him through the door. Disconcertingly, Amanda did not leave. He ignored her and sputtered an electrical signal to the communications system on his nearby desktop. A minute later, a fuzzy image formed, part faint blue light, part diffuse standing electrical waves. The two parts complemented each other poorly to build a picture of Kent, the head of operations and Vincent's nominal superior.

"Kent," Vincent said, "we're having some problems and I'm going to ascend. We need medical treatment. We've each developed multiple, pressure-related tumors."

The Kent image stilled. "Are they immediately life threatening?" he asked.

Vincent didn't shrug. He had no shoulders, but he used an electrical equivalent that transmitted well. "We have tumors, Kent. How immediate do you want it?"

"Between fifty-six and seventy hours from now, Vincent," Kent replied, "a big rock is going to hit this hemisphere. We can't get more information because another watch satellite was struck by debris. Our best guess is that it's between a kilometer and a kilometer and a half wide."

Vincent didn't respond. Whether it struck land or sea, an asteroid of that size would leave a big hole, blocking the sun for weeks or months with atmospheric debris. The sheer force of the shock wave would ravage the towns and maybe even kill the population outright. He had close friends in Charlotte's Web.

"What can we do?" Vincent asked.

"Batten down everything. Secure the computer systems as best you can. You may want to get a little distance between the base and the ocean floor. Shock waves will be bad."

"What about you?"

"The towns may survive, depending on what happens to sunlight and how many toxic minerals rain down on the ocean's surface. We're scattering everyone as far and as deep as we can, but it may be no use. In a week any town that survives will start sending out radio signals. Any survivors will rendezvous on those."

"I wish I was there," Vincent said.

Kent was silent again. There was history and respect between these two, polarized sides of a debate, generation past and generation present. "This is why we've done everything we've done, Vincent. This is to survive."

"Plankton *survives*, Kent. Humanity has to *live*. We have no dignity and we have no hope. I'm here because someone was so afraid that he didn't know that sometimes being true to what you are means admitting you lost."

"We all make sacrifices, Vincent," Kent said. "The costs are high, but we live and we dream. Thousands of generations before us stuck through misery because they hoped tomorrow would be better. It won't always be like this."

"Good luck, Kent," Vincent said finally. "I'll talk to you when we start picking up the pieces."

While Renald and Amanda secured the camp, Vincent stayed in the lab, supposedly working on the problem of the tumors. He wasn't. He'd figured out what was wrong before even speaking to Kent.

He'd never been short of ways to kill himself. In the middle layers of a deep ocean, only a dozen generations from terrestrial life, the trick was keeping yourself alive. When people like Kent had found no traction for

their arguments about the sanctity of life, they'd inevitably turned to community interest. It had never been difficult to show that Vincent was not only a biological, but an intellectual luminary. His death would be a serious loss to the community, making everyone's life that much harder. But the community, whether Charlotte's Web or the larger network of towns, was a fuzzy target and Vincent had never accepted that the needs of the others should stop him from ending a life of misery. Now, today, he felt he had the strength to overcome the survival instinct, the same dumb instinct that had kept mindless creatures alive through eons of suffering. He cursed his collective ancestors, those who were neither mothers nor fathers. Today felt like the day he could be as brave as Merced, even if he was twelve years late. But today, his decision suddenly implicated Renald and Amanda, not a fuzzy concept.

The biochemical problem was simple in comparison. The genetic engineers had modified every one of Vincent's sixty thousand genes to produce proteins that would survive the pressure at the bottom of the ocean. An extra two kilometers of water above them pressing down with three gravities was enough to squash and change the shape of every protein, which changed the way it functioned. So the engineers had tested and made changes in each individual gene, one by one. And they hadn't missed a single gene.

They'd missed the entire specific immune system. They'd missed the immune proteins on all B-cells and all T-cells. It wasn't their fault. The proteins on immune cells and in antibodies were not produced by regular genes. The immune elements of T-cells and antibodies developed in the fetus. Each B-cell and T-cell shuffled sets of DNA fragments like cards in a deck, keeping any combination that didn't attack the host.

The problem was that in coming to the ocean floor, the pressure had squashed the immune elements of every antibody and T-cell. Vincent, Renald, and Amanda had entirely different immune systems down here, none of which were tailored to the bodies that contained them. There were undoubtedly some autoimmune diseases forming right now. And a handful of benign tumors in each of them had now escaped immune surveillance.

If they stayed down here, they would die, unless Vincent could find some medical solution before the tumors or autoimmune diseases killed them. Renald was a good physician and geneticist, but he didn't have Vincent's leaps of intuition and creativity.

Vincent's first idea had been the one with the most promise: return to Charlotte's Web and hope that the deep pressure changes would be reversible, or at least treatable. The immune cells should be fine, and they would regain the immunities they had before. The ruined antibodies that were probably now in the early stages of attacking their bodies would do a great deal of damage, but might eventually wear out before Vincent, Renald, and Amanda died. But now, there was every chance that there would be no town to return to. There was a chance that the three of them would be the last survivors of all the dreams and aspirations of the thousands who'd lived and died to come to colonize this system. And he was likely the only person who had a chance of saving Renald and Amanda.

Vincent left the lab, gagged down a slimy lump in the kitchen as his stomach prepared to send it back, and went to his room to sleep.

In many dreams, Vincent had legs and saw the sun. It was a spotlight in a black sea with sediment drifting in front of it. He didn't know what legs felt like, but faithless instinct suggested. It was an erotic feeling. He'd lived so long among alien things that elicited no sexual recognition in his brain that arms and legs were deeply sexual. They felt natural, frustratingly, hauntingly compelling.

As in most dreams, some part of him was detached, critical, realistic. This part repeated the childhood litany: *Don't trust your instincts. They aren't for here.* But instinct seduced and in dream he drifted over a field of floating, waving grass, fat-leaved and tickling his dreamed legs. A woman appeared beneath him, with pale grey skin, plump with spaghetti hair floating about her large, bulbous eyes. Her arms and legs spread straight out and he throbbed at her beauty and didn't know what to do. He ached and woke frustrated.

He remembered the dream with painful precision. Very deeply and very powerfully, he hated who he was. Sexuality was not safe for them. Pregnancy was too complicated to design. So Vincent, Amanda, and everyone in the towns squirted eggs and sperm into containers for the genetic engineers. There was no pleasure. A pharmaceutical injection triggered the release. The neural circuitry for reproduction existed in their brains, but led nowhere. The genetic engineers didn't know how to rewrite the neural patterns that were hardwired by evolution into instinct. Every one of them was haunted by a desire that ran nowhere.

Much later, Renald and Amanda found Vincent before an inactive work station in a still lab. They were winded. They gulped the oxygenated water, listening to the electrical movement in the room.

"We've gotten everything ready outside," Amanda said. "We can detach the main building from the sea floor whenever you want."

Vincent had no authority over them, but it was indicative of their relationship that they cleared most plans with him before acting. He considered not responding, but didn't want to be artificial, affected.

"I've figured out what our problem is," he said.

"How bad is it?" Renald asked.

"Bad enough. Our immune systems were initialized, so to speak, under one pressure. They're not set for this new depth. Benign tumors that were being controlled under the weight of the middle ocean have now escaped immune surveillance on the bottom. And I think our immune systems are probably attacking our bodies too, although it's too early to see symptoms."

"Can we fix it?" Renald asked.

"Maybe," Vincent said.

His companions shot forward.

"If you think it's possible, that's great!" Renald said.

"Is it?" Vincent swung his expressionless face toward them. "Look at you. What are you? What are we here? We're freaks on the bottom of the ocean."

"It's better than being dead," Amanda said.

"Is it? Where we grew up was barely better than being dead. And it certainly wasn't for our friends. Was it for Colin, or Darla, or Sergei?"

He didn't calculate the comment to bite, but the names carried emotional weight. They summoned memories of childhood friends with painful, wasting autoimmune diseases. Torturous, experimental therapies were ineffective and the playmates expired, faded to nothing by genetic errors.

"We aren't free," he said, more quietly. In his mind, he saw Merced, his best friend at ten years old, a horrifying barracuda-faced girl who'd wanted to see the sun and who had risen into the photosynthesizing zone in the top two hundred meters of the ocean. Designed for the ocean floor and barely surviving the limited pressure in the upper dark zone of the sea, all her proteins had denatured in the reduced pressure, the opposite of what had happened to their immune systems on the bottom. She'd floated dead while the townspeople, those who weren't cursed at conception to exile on the bottom of the ocean, collected her. There was no starker reminder that none of the survivors of Vincent's generation would ever see the sun.

"We aren't really alive," he said. "The people who made us sacrificed everything human just so we could exist. We're human brains living in alien bodies that don't connect right. There's no beauty, no attraction, no love. We don't have parents. We don't have children. We don't have family. Humans on Earth and on other colonies, even the most worthless exile or prisoner, can taste food, see and feel sunlight, look in the mirror and not frighten themselves."

"We're your family, Vincent," Amanda said.

"What are you saying?" Renald asked Vincent.

"We've surrendered too much, suffered too much. We don't live in dignity because those who came before us were not brave enough to accept that their runs were over."

"You're not going to make the cure?" Renald said.

"I'm saying we have a chance to right a mistake."

"I'm not ready to die, Vincent," Amanda said.

Renald stared silently at Vincent. "The three of us dying won't accomplish anything," he said finally. "Towns across the world have the plans to make more of us, literally more of you and me."

Vincent swished his arm like an ax chopping.

"Stop thinking about accomplishment! It's not about the dream or the goal or extinction. Too much has been done for the sake of fear masquerading as vision. This is about us, as people, and only about us. Think about this as people. Not the vilest criminal on Earth has to live like this."

"I think it's immoral to throw away lives for no reason," Renald said.

"You've bought the company line without thinking, Renald. Think!"

"I haven't bought anything, Vincent. I'm just willing to stick it out."

"Kent's words."

"Mine. And I'm not going to absolve you."

Vincent and Renald stared at each other.

"What does that mean, Renald?" Amanda asked.

Neither answered.

"What does that mean, Vincent? What about absolving? Is this about the germ cells you destroyed in Charlotte's Web?"

"Vincent's looking for a moral out," Renald said. "He knows that I can't figure out the treatment to this immune problem, not like he could. I think he's getting ready to tell us he's ready to kill himself after talking about it for so long. The problem is that if he kills himself now, he takes us with him. He's trying to find a way out of being a murderer by inaction. So much for the brave and ethical Vincent."

Vincent said nothing and Amanda stared at him with her huge, vacuous eyes. He thought of Merced. The path she'd taken, intentionally or not, had always been open to him. And now it seemed to be closing again. He'd never ended things when he should have, made his statement, made his choice the way he'd always argued that the first human colonists should have taken.

He cracked inside, the sadness, the frustration trapped, as much as laughter was, aching for release from a bulky, fleshy prison. He was and was not the person he'd thought he was, wanted to be. He was neither the courageous forerunner like Merced, not the protector like Kent. He was weak and strong, just like everyone else, but in the wrong places. His tearless, lidless eyes stared uselessly at Renald and Amanda. He cried without physical release, for lost friends, lost dreams, and lost self.

Others thought that Merced had gone crazy, had cracked like so many others. But he and Merced had known that the sun's light contained the trappings of humanity that had been stripped from them: beauty, pleasure, passion, love.

"Amanda and I will finish unhooking the base from the sea floor," Renald said. "The asteroid is due sometime in the next ninety minutes. You decide what you're going to do. Come on, Amanda."

"I've already decided what I'm going to do."

Their faces, like dead fish in the dark, carried no nuance, nor had Vincent inflected the statement with any hint of his choice. They waited and even he waited.

"I'm following Merced." ○

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GABE'S GLOBSTER

Lawrence Person

Gabe unknotted tarp tie-lines, propped open the lean-to, and thrust a dozen blinking chickens up into the Caribbean sun. That accomplished, he poured himself two fingers of rum, lit a spliff, and walked out of the storm trench. Later he'd attend to the necessities of breakfast and bowls, but for now he was content to fortify himself with hair-of-the-dog and gaze into the endless blue morning.

Last night's tropical storm should have scattered a good assortment of driftwood for his carvings along the beaches. Since fleeing both his commercial banking job and his carping hellshrew of a wife, such art (sold under a *nom de plume*) had been his sole source of income, and was now sufficient to keep him in pot and rum without dipping into his Cayman Islands account.

Fortification accomplished, Gabe stripped and waded into the ocean for his morning ablutions.

Three eggs and a small pot of beans later, Gabe, re-clothed, made his way along the beach. This part of the coastline was too rough for the tourist trade, filled with rocky outcroppings and scattered, narrow, seaweed-

strewn beaches insufficiently picturesque for hordes of his pasty, overweight, Nikon-bearing compatriots to waddle across. Nor was it more than sparsely inhabited by natives, the nearest harbor deep enough to support even a modest fishing fleet a good five miles away. His closest neighbors were goat herders a mile or so inland. Once a month he paid them to drive him into town in their rickety pickup truck for hookers and supplies, and to send off his carvings and pick up payments for same. The isolation suited his misanthropic outlook to a T.

Gabe had cleared the few hundred feet of beach within view of his lean-to for aesthetic reasons, but out of his sightline there was no end to the flotsam and jetsam staining the far from pristine sands. Old plastic milk cartons, discarded beer cans, and Styrofoam packing peanuts all had their place in the trashscape clustering there. Amidst that morning's refuse he found three good pieces of driftwood. He was already thinking about how one might be whittled into a mermaid when he scrambled over an outcropping and stopped dead in his tracks.

He'd seen lots of strange things washed up, but he'd never seen anything like *that*. It was an irregular oblong, at least twenty feet long and roughly seven wide and five high, a dirty, translucent gray glistening wetly in the sunlight, like the inside of a clam.

Gabe scuttled closer, wondering what the Caribbean had vomited up this time. It looked like no aquatic creature he'd seen or even heard of. He thought it might be a decaying hunk of whale, but that didn't explain why it was so smooth and devoid of features. He grabbed a short stick, walked up and poked it. It sank into the translucent mass a full foot before meeting some sort of resistance. Mere inches from the surface, his hands felt a distinct chill around the thing, and he wondered what depths it had been hauled up from. But weren't most deep-dwelling creatures small due to the tremendous water pressure?

Just then the thing seemed to shudder ever so slightly, its wet flesh rippling like jelly. Strange, as Gabe couldn't feel any wind.

He stared at the thing a few minutes more, trying vainly to figure out what it might be. Unable to, he mentally shrugged and turned to go when he caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye. A fiddler crab scurried slowly across the sand toward the glob, presumably the first of many scavengers to start pecking at it. He wondered how difficult the gelatinous flesh would be for claws to rend. But as it reached the mass, the thing's "skin" seemed to ripple again, flowing over and encasing the crab in its translucent embrace.

Gabe watched to see how it struggled, but all was still, the crab now entombed in the thing, unmoving.

After a lunch of beans, rice, and rum, Gabe dug his ancient PowerBook out of its sand-proof case, then splayed the solar strip out beside it on his folding table. Normally he only powered it up long enough to e-mail carving pictures to his agent (his equally ancient Nikon digital camera, along with his seldom-used satphone, being the only other technological baubles marring his Robinson Crusoe existence), but this time he wanted to find out what the mystery lump on the beach was.

He ran a cord to his phone, waited for the Mac to connect to the sat signal, and pulled up a search page. Results for *ocean mystery lumps tissue* brought up a lot of pages on fish tumors. *Ocean globs creatures* seemed a bit closer to the mark, where he quickly came across the words “cryptozoology” and “globsters.”

Cryptozoology seemed a fascinating mixture of real zoology and *The Weekly World News*, unknown animals like wild hogs and new shark species rubbing shoulders with Yeti and the Loch Ness Monster. Globsters were strange, unclassified masses of rotting flesh washed up on shore. After a closer look, most weren’t unknown; a surprising number of globsters initially thought to be plesiosaurs actually turned out to be decaying basking sharks, while others were found to be hunks of whale blubber, or beached whales. But a few still defied easy taxonomical assignment:

- In 1896, a giant fibrous mass some 18 feet long and 7 feet wide washed up in St. Augustine, Florida. It was initially identified as a sperm whale, but was later thought a previously unknown species of giant octopus.
- In 1960, a roundish carcass some 20 feet long, 18 feet wide and about 4 1/2 feet thick, with an estimated weight between 5 and 10 tons, covered in fine hair with a strange lump in the middle, washed up in Tasmania. “A strong acidic reek came off the flesh, very similar to battery acid, and dogs and horses were unwilling to approach it.” Later thought to be the remains of a whale shark.
- In 1965, one 30 feet long and 8 feet high, covered in thick wooly hair, washed up in New Zealand. The head of Auckland University’s zoology department didn’t know what to make of it.
- In 1988, an 8 foot long, 3 foot thick blob described as “very white and fibrous . . . with five arms [like] a disfigured star” washed up in Bermuda. Most seemed to think it shark skin.

There were a few more like that; mysterious corpses washed up on shore, no one exactly sure what they were. All well and good, but it didn’t tell him anything about *his* mysterious beach corpse.

He looked up the names of a couple of marine biologists in Miami specializing in the Caribbean, stowed away his PowerBook, then hauled his Nikon out of its sand-proof case and headed back down the beach.

Despite a couple of intervening hours, Gabe could discern no signs that scavengers had been at work on the globster. No hungry birds pecked or tore at its flesh, and he couldn’t smell any decay below the usual aroma of saltwater.

He removed the lens cap and started taking pictures, slowly moving closer. He wondered what anyone would be able to tell from them, given the formlessness of the mass. Maybe a careful dissection would be able to make out internal structures, but he certainly couldn’t.

He moved right up next to it, trying to get a close-up in case the camera could pick up some deeper structure eluding his naked eye. Despite the balmy Caribbean afternoon, the chill around it seemed to have spread. It was notably, unaccountably cold within three feet of the thing. He wondered what it would be like to stick his hands into the amorphous mass, to let himself sink slowly into its cold, enveloping embrace . . .

He shook off the strange thought, then moved back to get another angle on the thing when a seagull swooped down to the beach and waddled toward the globster. Suddenly, some five feet away from it, the bird stopped, then jerked, as though its foot were suddenly caught and it was trying to free it. For a few seconds it staggered around in a most un-birdlike fashion, as if drunk. Finally, it stopped staggering, then walked slowly straight toward, and then *into*, the globster, disappearing from view.

For several seconds, Gabe was too stunned by this distinctly un-avian behavior to even move. Finally, he turned to leave when he felt a prick on his big toe. Looking down he saw a half-dozen fiddler crabs surround his feet, and an equal number making their way across the debris-strewn sand toward him. It was an easy matter to step over them, but at every step they all changed course to intercept him in uncanny unison.

He had to fight the urge to run, realizing there was no way the crabs could catch him if he just kept stepping over them at a brisk pace, and they were precious little threat if they could catch him. *What are they going to do, pinch me to death?*

He felt a strange sense of relief as he scrambled on top of the outcropping, but then heard a distinct *plop* behind him.

He turned to see the seagull, its body still faintly glistening, leave the globster's embrace, the hole it had escaped (been expelled?) from quickly sealing back into a smooth, amorphous mass. The bird staggered briefly across the sand, then stopped and folded its wings, its body still as its head swiveled slowly around out to sea, then back again, taking in the rest of the beach.

Until it was looking straight at him, when its head stopped rotating, its beady little bird eyes fixed on him with unwavering attention.

Back on his own beach, Gabe sipped rum while e-mailing globster pictures off to the marine biologists without much hope of a reply, pondering what to do. Whatever his other flaws (and there were many, all of which he could enumerate at length to his exceptionally rare visitors), he had always lacked a penchant for self-delusion. He might be a reprobate, misanthropic, drunken beach bum, but he was far from stupid. Whatever it was, the globster was a deeply unnatural thing, and was obviously controlling the creatures he had seen that morning. Strange and improbable, but it was still the most obvious explanation. The question was what to do about it.

The reasonable, logical thing to do would be to remove himself to another part of the island, or tell the local constable (who came around once a month to sell him pot) and let him take care of it. But if he were reasonable and logical, he'd still be a married banker.

What to do? he wondered. To answer that question, he was going to need a lot more rum.

When dinnertime rolled around, he put aside the half-finished mermaid his hands had been carving while he mulled over the problem, spilled the remainder of the bottle into his glass, and went off to check his drift lines. No fish having been kind enough to impale itself on one of his

hooks, Gabe went looking for a chicken to slaughter instead. Preferably Roberta, since her egg-laying had dwindled the last few weeks.

However, when he switched on his solar lantern, none of his chickens were anywhere in evidence. After a few minutes of looking for them a suspicion formed.

He headed toward the globster, finding his chickens milling aimlessly against the rocky outcropping that separated the two beaches. He was briefly fearful of what they might do under the globster's control when he tried to take them back, but they seemed more dazed than anything else. Perhaps they were near enough to lure, but not dominate. He grabbed them two at a time to ferry back to the rusted cage in the corner of the lean-to. There they all seemed almost normal, clucking and milling as usual, save for a tendency to cluster toward the side of the cage nearest the globster.

The last he retrieved was Roberta. "Don't worry, girl, I'm saving your soul from alien control," he said, just before lopping off her head.

For the first time he could remember, a glass of rum and a spliff were insufficient to lull him to sleep. He stayed awake, tossing and turning despite the ocean breeze, thinking about the globster problem. He kept seeing it in his mind's eye, the circle of crabs around him, and, most of all, the seagull, fixing him with that unnatural stare. The images continued to flash through his mind even as he fell into a restless, haunted sleep, chasing him through his dreams.

He was checking his drift lines, pulling fish after fish off them; sunfish, marlin, red snapper. He tossed each behind him on the beach as he moved on to the next, but when he turned back each had turned strangely translucent. He kept going back to the line, and every time he turned back around, each fish become larger and more like the globster, until a dozen full-sized globsters were stretched out behind him. Then they started to move slowly toward him, still continuing to grow, so that every time he turned around they were closer, until he started to walk out to sea and was in his chair carving birds out of wood. But as he carved, the faces he had already completed started to change, their wooden eyes swiveling to look at him whenever he put them down. He tried to carve their faces off entirely, but a seagull kept snatching the knife from his hand, then started to peck at his eyes when he grabbed his pen, and started crossing through the clauses in the loan agreement, but when he turned each page he saw the same clauses reappearing at the bottom of the next. He kept crossing them out, but soon the red ink was pouring out of the pen and all over his suit. "I can't pick up your cleaning," said Marnie, sucking on one of her endless Winstons, "I've got yoga this afternoon," she said, flipping through the channels. But all showed the same expanse of moonlight beach, where he was running after fleeing chickens, each of which deliquessed when he grabbed them, splashing over his toes, only to reform some twenty feet further ahead, still fleeing across the endless beach, his wet feet crunching across the sand as the ocean breeze blew over him—

He let out a cry of pain as something sliced open his left foot. He toppled over and grabbed it, seeing a rusty tin can lid still half embedded in

it. As he tugged the lid painfully free, he realized he was no longer dreaming, and that he was standing ten feet away from the globster.

An eerie blue glow radiated from it, and its body no longer seemed quite so undifferentiated, with lumpy nubs the size of basketballs moving around underneath the surface. As they moved, Gabe saw that the blue glow came not from the creature itself, but from the strange runes that seemed to fade and pulse as they moved underneath its surface. As he watched them, he began to feel the same compulsion to let himself sink into the thing, much stronger than it had been that afternoon. He took a single step in its direction, only to be jarred out of his trance by the throbbing pain in his still-bleeding foot.

He tore his gaze away from the globster, and by that strange glow he saw a small army of animals arrayed in a circle around it. There were uncounted crabs, three or four snakes, a pelican, a flamingo, and a scrawny yellow housecat, all staring directly at him.

Gabe turned, only to find the seagull he had seen that morning screeching at him as it blocked his path. Gabe flailed wildly at it, the bird refusing to move as it pecked at his arms and face. He finally grabbed it by its neck and tossed it behind him.

By then he could hear the other creatures coming after him as he fled, a cacophony of screeches and hissing. He ran blindly, his foot still bleeding, batting at invisible foes flapping at his face, stumbling over unseen obstacles in the dark.

After what seemed an eternity he collapsed in a heap, his chest heaving, the nightmarish pursuit left behind, the only sounds his own labored breathing and the roar of the distant surf.

Once he was sufficiently recovered to move, he carefully made his way toward the ocean, finally coming out on a beach he recognized, after a few moments, as being on the other side of his own, presumably a safe distance from the globster. He washed his foot in the ocean, just barely able to stifle his screams at the piercing sting of the salt water in his wound, then bound it as best he could with his torn shirt. He felt lightheaded, drained, scared, and dreadfully sober.

But after a few moments the fear left him, to be replaced with a cold, unyielding anger. The globster had attacked *him* in *his* home, on *his* beach, on *his* island.

Come hell or high water, he was going to kill the thing.

The only question was how.

After his third bout of knocking, the door to the shack swung open, a bleary-eyed Juan staring out at him, the goat-herder leveling an ancient revolver.

"Señor Gabe?" he asked wonderingly.

Gabe, painfully aware he looked even more disheveled than usual, held up ten twenty-dollar bills he had dug out of his secret box half an hour before. "I want to buy twenty gallons of gasoline," he said, "and a goat."

The gasoline proved more difficult to obtain than the goat, Juan being down to a meager ten gallons in his farm tank. This necessitated driving into town, only to find the local station, run by a scarred Cuban expatri-

ate, was also out of gas, and wouldn't have any in before the truck arrived at four that afternoon.

Gabe bought one hundred meters of rope, an even longer length of clothesline, four buckets, a hat pin, and, given the wait, another bottle of rum. He spent the rest of the time drinking, eating fried fish and conch, and playing dominos with the local ancients in the public square near the dry fountain.

Juan returned him to the lean-to just before sunset.

Exhausted and bleeding once again, Gabe wondered, somewhat abstractly, if he was going to die.

He was back at the globster's beach, slowly playing out the line of rope. At the end of it was Juan's scrawniest goat, wearing a makeshift harness with four buckets filled with gasoline. Into each bucket ran a clothesline, the rest of its length wrapped around the rope, all of which had been soaked in gasoline.

In retrospect it was a crazy plan. Making the harness out of tarp, sticks and rope had proven difficult. Getting the contraption, and the buckets, around the goat had proven next to impossible. He had finally fed it a small meal of beans and just enough pot to clam it down without putting it to sleep.

Now he was slowly playing out his line as the goat, already entranced, walked straight toward the globster. Earlier Gabe had felt the familiar compulsion stealing over him, at which point he had jabbed the hat pin deep into his right thigh. A slow dribble of blood continued to flow down his leg. (At least he'd known enough to avoid his femoral artery.) Every time he felt his mind start to lose focus he'd shift the needle.

Now that the goat was making its plodding way toward the globster (which seemed larger, and its glowing runes brighter, the knobs under its skin starting to stretch and lengthen), all he could think of was how many things might go wrong, how the gasoline might slosh out, or how the view through its possessed minions might alert the globster to the threat. That, and how very, very tired he was. The anger was still there, like a hard lump of glowing coal at the back of a fireplace, but the blood and sleep loss were conspiring to make him immensely weary.

Still, miraculously, the ploy seemed to be working. The goat was mere feet away from the globster now, and Gabe flicked open his lighter.

It wouldn't light.

He flicked the wheel again, then a third time, without success. The goat was now mere inches away.

In a panic, Gabe flicked the lighter wheel faster and faster, sure from the heft of it that it couldn't be out of fuel.

The goat entered the translucent side of the globster, the runes around it briefly flickering through a polychromatic array. The first bucket on the left side seemed to catch on some sort of resistance, spilling its load of gas at the globster's edge.

Finally, as the front half of the goat sank completely into the globster, the lighter caught. With shaking hands, Gabe applied the flame to the soaked rope. For a few seconds, nothing seemed to happen, and then Gabe had to drop the rope as the flame raced along it.

Just as all but the goat's rear had entered the globster, the burning line reached the pool of spilled gasoline, which promptly ignited, followed shortly by the three remaining buckets still attached to the goat—now almost entirely encased in the globster. The whole amorphous mass went up with a satisfying *whoosh*. Gabe leaped up for one brief, sweet moment of triumph.

Then his world became pain.

He dropped to the ground screaming, every part of his body in an unimaginable, inhuman agony. He rolled over, unconsciously pulling his hair as unfathomable images raced through his mind. Vistas of decayed cyclopean architecture warming under a green sun, of a garden of ambulatory blue and gold plants raising their ropey tendrils in supplication while tantalizing alien aromas wafted off them, of the lifeless voids of interstellar space, of bizarre machines of metal and glass rising taller than any skyscraper, meshing parts rotating in and out of dimensions unseen, of unearthly creatures ambling across an arctic waste, their multiplicity of strangely slender yet amorphous limbs seeming to flow and reform as they moved, of a countless horde of furry creatures fleeing an alien city ablaze, a horrible, hundred-eyed face towering above the flames, of impossibly vast entities stretching for miles beneath the ocean's depths.

After what seemed an eternity of pain, the feeling started to ebb as the images shattered, coming ever faster and less coherent, the crystalline roar of a mind immeasurably vaster than his own shattering into a thousand pieces, then again, and again, each shard smaller and less mindful than the last, until finally a black, cold silence descended upon him and he was alone in the night, listening to the pounding surf and crackling flames.

Just before noon, Gabe managed to rouse his aching, fatigued body up and out of the lean-to, then released eleven restless chickens into the Caribbean sun. That accomplished, he poured himself two fingers of rum, lit a spliff, and took inventory of his battered body. He had two quarter-sized second-degree burns on the palms of his hands, his right thigh kept up a constant, dull ache, and his left foot sent a jab of pain all the way up his leg every time he put his weight on it. Later in the day he'd have to change the bandages on all three, but for now he was content to drink and smoke his breakfast while gazing into the endless blue morning.

When he felt strong enough, he hobbled slowly over to the globster's beach, finding nothing but charred buckets and rope remnants, a large burned circle of putrefying, grayish sludge rapidly melting into the sand, and a single burned goat's hoof. A few fiddler crabs scurried with dull normalcy across the beach.

After a few minutes, the stench become more than he could stand, and as he turned to go, he saw the seagull that had been eyeing him before, flopping spastically at the edge of the ocean. When he walked over to take a closer look, the thing turned and gazed at him for a moment before its eyes lost focus and its neck spastically jerked away. It flopped another couple of feet down, none of its limbs seeming to move in coordination with the others, different parts of its body seeming to twitch of their own accord.

Gabe watched it continue to spasm and twitch for a few moments, then reached down and snapped its neck. ○

THE HOB CARPET

Ian R. MacLeod

Ian R. MacLeod has published four novels and three short story collections, and has a new novel, *Song of Time*, due out from PS Publishing this year. His work has been widely translated and received many awards. He lives in the riverside town of Bewdley, in England. "The Hob Carpet" came from an idea for an alternate earth that he'd been entertaining for many years, and finally took shape when, in the way in which stories have, it sucked in another couple of ideas that he'd been saving for something else. Ian has a personal website at www.ianrmacleod.com.

**A word of warning: there are scenes in this story
that may be disturbing to some readers.**

I'm a monster, an aberration. I've never really known what it means to be human. You could try to trace what I am back to the life that supposedly formed me. Try, and most probably fail. In that, at least, reader, and even though you may try to deny it, I'm much like you.

I was raised in a family of moderate influence and reasonable wealth. My father's line were successful merchants—men who had once plied the Great North Water, but calculated long before I was born that there was more money to be earned trading along its banks. My mother's side were paler-skinned than is common, and perhaps more savage and unpredictable in their moods as a result. That was her, certainly; a waxing, waning Moon to orbit my father's calmer earth. Her lineage was of the temple guards, and her father was proud of the spear-wound which a skirmish in his youth had inflicted. I remember him baring his shoulder as we sat in the lazy aftermath of a processional feast, inviting me to place my finger in the cratered dimple in his shoulder. It was like touching a second navel; another part of my birth. In those peaceful times, the wound had most probably been inflicted during training. The man drank to excess, and grew bitter performing duties that were entirely ceremoni-

al. I still believe that there was intent in the riding accident that brought about his early death.

I imagine it was this very unlikeness which first attracted my parents to each other, and which eventually drove them apart. That probably also explains why I was the only fruit of their union, although, as I of all people should understand, it is dangerous to peer too deeply into truths of love—if any such truths exist. But, for whatever reasons, I grew up largely alone, and somewhat pampered, and perhaps had more freedom to roam my own thoughts and obsessions than was good for me. That, at least, has often been said.

Our homestead and its grounds covered many acres. It rose—still rises, for all I know—above the banks of the same river that had brought my family its wealth, beyond Eight Span Bridge and upstream from Dhiol. It was a pretty place, if anywhere so large can be called simply pretty, emerging from the cliffs like the prow of some unimaginable vessel on thick, golden-stone ramparts which had become bedecked with mosses and flowering ivies since they had lost their military function, and were a roost and feeding ground for many varieties of bat and bird. The battlements, viewing towers and high perimeter walkways along which I wandered were decorated with flags and ceramics, fruiting arbours and fishpools. The arrowslits which had once been constructed for purposes of defense were set with filigree metals and stained glass. There were spectacular views of the Great North Water and all its barges and sails passing far below. The towers of Dhiol hazed the middle distance and the vast forests of Severland reared beyond to meet the peaks of the Roof of the World, which still shone white with snow at the height of summer even in those more beneficent times. Turning to the inward side of the battlements revealed the gameboard neatness of a typical middle class homestead, with its ditches and canals filled with all the patterns of the sky and the trees which shaded them. At some point as the eye proceeded inwards along this dazzling patchwork of the produce fields toward the main house which rose at its center, those fields became gardens, although the moment of transition was hard to discern.

My family homestead now seems like a kind of heaven. Of course, I then took it entirely for granted, but if there was one thing which I ignored more than any other, it was the presence of the hobs. Walk along the avenues that spanned the manicured distances toward our house, and their stooped backs would be as common as the swallows which then wheeled in the summer twilights. They were the first thing I saw each morning as their hands parted the vast curtains of my bedroom. Pinching out the candles and lanterns as the shadows deepened until they became shadow themselves, they were the last thing I glimpsed at night. But imagine for a moment, reader, that all of this is new to you—then think of a part of your existence which is always there, something which you would notice if the effort seemed worth such foolishness but which you never do. Imagine the smell of your own flesh, or the taste of your own tongue, or the blink of your eyelids, or the feel of your own toes. Then think of the hobs.

* * *

Like you, I was raised in their presence. I was never close enough to my mother to ask her whether one suckled me, but I imagine that that statement in itself provides an answer; most likely, I grew plump affixed to the nipple of some nameless surrogate hob. Certainly, the hands of numerous hobs would have dealt with all the messier tasks which the rearing of a baby requires. Then, as tradition demands on the brightening of my thirtieth Moon, and in a ceremony which I cannot even remember, I was presented with the first of what my parents no doubt fondly imagined would be the beginnings of a large retinue in the shape of two young hobs.

I imagine you expect me to record how I developed an especially strong and sentimental bond with these creatures, but I honestly did not. I called them Goo and Gog. Babyish sounds which, to an imperious three-year-old, seemed to fit their mute and trusting natures. In retrospect, I can see how cleverly they learned to understand my moods—to sense whatever I wanted long before I had made the appropriate hobbish gesture; often, in fact, before I had even fully decided what I wanted myself. But they were typical of their sort. Blue-eyed. Pale. Slope-headed. Guiltily deferential. Stooped. Tonguelessly mute, of course, and entirely lacking in any sense of gender, although I was too young to understand the meaning of the shiny scarring I sometimes glimpsed within their slack mouths and beneath their crude kilts. I was, as the saying goes, like any other child with a new hob. On the few occasions when I didn't take Goo and Gog entirely for granted, I passed the time by signing them to perform pointless and undignified tasks. *Get. Put down. Bring back. Take away. Roll over. Wave feet. Eat shit. Pant like dog. Bring back.* When I think now of my two silent and mostly ignored companions, I cannot summon the misty-eyed nostalgia which I know many humans seem to feel for their first attendants, be they called Pip and Pop, or Boo and Baa. All I feel is a sense of emptiness, and a vague guilt, which strengthens to something resembling disgust when I remember the many times when either Goo or Gog—have I mentioned that I never troubled to tell them apart?—was bound and flogged as punishment for my own misdemeanors until their backs streamed with blood.

Hobs are everywhere in our world, but those which do not belong to our retinues are generally shy as fauns. They slink back along corridors or hide in the vegetation as soon they sense our approach. So quickly and efficiently do they vanish that it barely ever occurs to us humans that they are there. If we were to consider this trick at all—which I then never did—it seems almost magical. But the fact is that hobs hear and scent us long before we are seen. To put it bluntly, we smell as strongly to them as they do to us, and they have trained themselves to notice our presence just as rigorously as we have trained ourselves not to notice theirs. Hob, or human. Ignored, or noticed. That, it sometimes seems to me now, is where the true distinction ultimately lies.

Even if I was unconcerned by such questions, I was a busy and inquisitive child, and my parents saw to it that I was provided with academics and priests to keep me occupied and out of their sight. A restless learner, I much preferred to stride around the grounds and hallways of our home-

stead than to be confined to the single high room in which I was supposed to study. My tutors, being in the main sensible, intelligent men and women—and, for academics, quick on their legs—were generally happy to walk with me.

Once I had mastered the basics of calligraphy and numerology, I became a child of endlessly changing enthusiasms and fascinations. Why do the petals of a flower only come in certain numbers? Why is the sky blue, and why are the stars only visible at night? And what, exactly, is the mechanism by which the seasons come and go? Later, I came to ask even more imponderable questions, such as how it is, if the Gods are endlessly wise, that people receive different answers when they pray to them. And why do hobs look so nearly like us, and yet remain so different. . . ? Perhaps I asked that last question as well as I strode along the florid avenues and golden-paved battlements with some flustered tutor. And, as always, the garden hobs retreated as they sensed our approach, and the domestic ones who followed with their fans and awnings waited until they were summoned by a gesture, and our debate continued as we took our ease on cushions laid across their bent backs and were silently served with refreshments by their unnoticed hands.

In winter, Dhiol became a less favored place. Although trade continued and the river never iced itself over in those days, it was customary for families of our class to travel downstream through the mountains and lowlands to escape the worst of the cold. Sometimes we crossed the Bounded Sea to sample the delights of the cities of Ulan Dor or Thris. Long before my age reached a century of Moons, I had stood on the Glass Pinnacle and counted—or tried to count—the sacred flamingos. I rode an elephant along the Parade of the Gods and blew the sacred horn to celebrate the flooding of the God River. I witnessed priests, crimsonly enrobed with the skins of their sacrifices, moving down the steps of the great temple of Thlug. But it was always the journey rather than the arrival that most appealed to me; the procession of landscapes as we headed down the Great North Water, then the glimpsed islands and broad horizons and all the changing moods of the sea. Being merchants, my family had their pick of the best vessels. No matter how rough the weather, they always felt like places of safety to me. Ships were places of exploration as well. After the endless avenues of our homestead, it was liberating to live aboard spaces so confined, yet within which—along gangways and inside storage spaces and beneath endless levels of deck—there was always some new surprise.

Afloat, the proximity of the hobs was unavoidable. Look up at the sails, and you would see dozens of them climbing like apes in a jungle. Look toward the waters, and there was the endless splash of the oars; a ship's heartbeat is the beating of its engine room drum. On the decks themselves, ropes were always being fed through pulleys, as woods and irons and brasses were polished. I stepped around these activities much as you might step around a lamp-pillar in the street, but I also studied their processes in the abstract sort of way that seems to typify my intellect. I came to enjoy analyzing the configuration of the sails, and quizzed the mariners about their differing functions. Occasionally, one of the figures

that moved with such acrobatic abandon along the spars and ropes would misjudge a leap and tumble into the sea. They never made a sound as they fell. The vessel pushed on without pause. I was reminded, I remember, of apples dropping from a tree. I even considered producing a poem on the subject, although, if I had ever written it, it would have been more about orchards than about hobs.

The masters, navigators and gangsmen were enormously proud of their vessels, and were as keen to show me their engine rooms, for all their stink and noise, as they were to demonstrate their understanding of the stars. Down at the waterline, the sustained beat of the motive drum, and the movement that came with it—the slide and creak of wood, the tensing of hob muscle, the huge combined intakes and outtakes of hob breath—became a solid presence that thrummed within your chest. Striding down the gangways, the captain or master would explain in great detail the length of the oars and the mechanisms of the rowlocks and the number of *arms*—they never talked of whole hob bodies—that serviced them. The squeamish might find such scenes hellish, but as I was told about stroke speeds and sweeps of arc and shift times, I saw the hobs as these mariners saw them; as one combined mass of muscle. The stink and effluent, the shortage of good air, the bodies—*components*—that failed during shifts and had to be swiftly hoisted out, disposed of and replaced without loss of the rhythm, were all mere technicalities; the equivalents of how a drainage engineer might discuss rates of inundation and flow.

The first time I came consciously into closer contact with a hob beyond my thoughtless encounters with our domestic retinue was on one of these ocean journeys. It was a pale morning, and our vessel was surrounded by nothing but sea. I had risen early to discover everything misted, shining and slippery, and greyly dark. I was still in the phase of inwardly composing poems that I never actually wrote, and I recollect as I stood at the rail and looked out into the fading nothingness that I was thinking how the ship itself, in its stealth and greyness, seemed to be made of little more than mist. Doubtless, the engine-room drum was still beating and the oars were thrashing as they drove us on—the entire ship would have thrummed and creaked as all such vessels do—but we had been at our journey for a few days, and all I felt was silence, all I breathed was stillness and fog.

The next thing I remember is a spinning whooshing, and being knocked sideways across the deck. When I recovered my senses, I discovered the weight of some other living thing lying on top of me, and a face briefly peering down into my own. What I saw, before it clambered off and loped into the mist, was nothing but the generalized features of a typical hob—beetle-browed, chinless, broad-nosed, pale-skinned and set with a wild spew of reddish hair. Several mariners were already running over to me as I got up. Even as I attempted to explain what had happened, it seemed impossible that I could have been touched—*assaulted*—by such a beast. Then one of the men grinned and pointed to the spew of rope and metal that had gouged itself across the deck. A pulley must have broken somewhere high up in the masts and come swinging toward me out of the

mist. If it hadn't been for the intervention of that hob, I would have been killed.

Another winter faded, and my family returned with the birds toward the mountains and forests of the cooler north, to find our gardens emerging from their winter swaddlings, and the house perfectly clean, and our beds warmed and aired, and fresh fruits and sweetmeats laid in bowls on the tables, and fires crackling in every hearth. The gardens, in particular, were delight in this coming season of growth. In response to my endless questions about the purposes of insects and the mechanisms of fruiting and growth, my parents placed me in the company of Karik, the most senior garden gangmaster.

Everything that's ever said about hob gangmasters is true. Karik was tall and unstooped. His face was broadly handsome. His skin was aristocratically dark. All in all, he was about as far from the near-hobbish caricature of his type as you could possibly get. But in every other way he fitted the bill. As he promenaded the fields and gardens, he would pause in his explanations of when the soil should be turned, or a tree pruned, and call over some creature that I, in my absorption, had not even noticed, and strike them hard and efficiently with the cane he always carried. No explanation was ever given. Glancing back as he and I strode on, I noticed how other nearby hobs ceased their tasks and scurried over to see to the needs of their—what *was* the term, comrade, fellow, friend, colleague? Perhaps it's a sign of the beginnings of my obsession that I was starting to wonder about such things. Karik was as skilled with his cane as he was with the other aspects of his craft, and I'm sure that some of the hobs had their limbs broken, although others remained capable of getting up and continuing working. I suspect a few were actually killed. Karik knew what he was doing, and I suppose the hobs understood as well.

As well as a cane, Karik carried several gardening implements slung around his hips on a belt. An eccentricity of his was that he would sometimes stoop down toward the earth and actually snip a shoot, or even dig out a weed, with his own bare hands. In that busy season for new planting, he would sometimes take the pointed wooden object he called his dibber, and work it into the soil, and physically plant a tuber or seed. I watched this activity with amazement. It seemed as unlikely a thing as a human cook peeling a vegetable, a sweep personally climbing up a chimney, or a dressmaker physically sewing the fabric of a dress. But when Karik encouraged me to try, I discovered that I actually liked the grainy feel of the earth and the dark scent it left upon my hands. I like it still.

As a student of horticulture, I also became a student of the work of the hobs. I felt by now that I knew our entire homestead. But, wandering with Karik and then on my own, I discovered new landscapes hilled with piles of mulching vegetation, and low arches which I'd long passed without noticing within the house itself, which led down narrow stairways into smoky caverns. The hobs were endlessly busy. They were always carrying things away, or bearing them in, or wading ditches, or bearing laundry, or scooping out sludge. Pushing my way around unlikely corners, I would emerge into storerooms and potting sheds. There were cavernous

kitchens and huge glasshouses and busy workshops and subterranean acreages of dusty furniture waiting for their fashion's return.

Once when I was exploring the gardens, I re-found a turn along which Karik had shown me several Moons earlier. The potting sheds, I reckoned with my newly acquired knowledge, would be already busy with the planting for the following spring, but, contrary to my expectations, they seemed to be deserted. I hunched along the dark passages, curious as ever, and enjoying the feel and the taste—it was too intense to be called merely a smell—of the rich, loamy earth. Here and there were set rooflights, emblazoning the blackness with gilded veins of Sun. The roots and shoots exposed by my exploring fingers could have been formed of the finest coral. When I sensed something ahead of me, I moved softly on. I had learned that, if I kept downwind of them and moved quietly enough, I could sometimes catch working hobs unawares.

Ribboned in a dazzling fall of light, Karik and a hob were engaged in some strange mutual contortion. The scene was oddly beautiful. They were both making sounds and their voices, hob grunt and human cry, intermingled in a way that could have been a sacred chant. Their gleaming bodies rose and fell. The hob, who was bending, shook her mane of hair in a spray of gold. Karik was bucking and baring his teeth. He was rivered with sweat. And his penis, which was at least as long and thick as his dibber, thrust and emerged from the hob's nether regions, and she thrust and bucked back. Then, with a rising bellow that began in the depths of Karik's lungs and which the higher scream of the hob's voice almost extinguished at its peak, the business that they were engaged in reached some kind of conclusion.

The two creatures, human and hob, fell back from each other toward the soft earth. Karik muttered something, and the hob replied in a growl as she climbed from her knees. Her gaze shifted along the tunnel to where I was standing as she swiped the dirt from her breasts, and she stepped back into the blackness, and was instantly gone. Karik turned to look in the same direction, his still erect penis trailing a glistening blob. When he saw me hunched there in the shadows, he tossed back his head and laughed like a God.

Hobs are born male or female. They do not lay eggs or have beaks or scales. They do not dwell in eyries or the depths of the ocean. Neither do they produce flowers or send out roots. They may have oddly pale skins and those masses of russet hair, and be broader and shorter than we humans are, but they are the only species I know of that chooses to walk on two legs just as we do. Their faces may be somewhat flatter than ours, but their eyes and mouths and ears and noses are arranged much like our own. In fact, their bodies are like ours in almost every significant detail. And they possess penises and vaginas—unless, that is, they have been physically removed.

As outdoor hobs routinely work naked, even a child far younger and less curious than I should long have been acquainted with these facts. Even you, patient reader, will be aware of the similarities of fleshy geometry that humans and hobs share. We are alike in ways that horses and

dogs and sheep and cattle and all the other creatures that serve us are not. That, I believe now, is why we keep ourselves so far apart.

What I saw happening between Karik and that hob left me puzzled, and it was a quieter and less exploratory child who inhabited our home-
stead for the rest of that summer. One who, much to the relief of his par-
ents and tutors, was happy to sit up in his room in the high tower and
seek knowledge within ancient scrolls.

After its uncertain start, the weather that year turned hotter than any-
one could remember this far north. People walked beneath fans and
awnings when they walked at all, and received their guests seated in
cool, lily-adorned baths. Carpets were taken up. Beds were placed on bal-
conies. Gangs of hobs were diverted from their usual tasks to fan air
along complex systems of vents. The gardens beyond my windows shim-
mered and blazed. Then, just a few days before my family was planning
to flee this furnace for the cooler Winds of the coast, the skies above Dhi-
ol finally darkened. I looked up from my work to silently urge the Gods to
break their thunder overhead. And, like the opening of a sluiceway, they
did. For all my newfound seriousness, I couldn't help but rush down the
stairways and out into the lightning-split torrent like the excited child I
still almost was. I spread my arms and tilted back my head. Jumping
from the lip of an overflowing fishpond, I felt my right leg slip out, and
twist and buckle with a grating snap.

It was a bad break. I was delirious for several days with medicines and
pain. When I finally awoke, I found myself immobile in a vast, strange
bed. Looking up at the ornate drapes, painted wooden arches and door-
sized cushions of which the boat-like structure was composed, I felt an
odd flash of recognition. An echo of my fever came back over me, and I
cried out. I feared for a moment that I had actually died, and was lying in
my own tomb. Or, worse still, that I had been interred while still living.
Pale and quick as a ghost, a hob face came and went amid the turbulent
decorations. Intense pain shot through me. I cried out again, and strug-
gled to fight my way out of this gilded tomb.

Footsteps came, followed by a flutter of hunting scenes and forests
amid the fabrics. I cringed, expecting some ebony guardian of the After-
world to emerge. But it was only my mother. I say *only*, but she was sur-
rounded as always by a large retinue of personal hobs dressed in silks
that complemented and blended with her own attire. They were bearing
the golden poles of the great crimson canopy that evolved into a hat as it
neared her head, and wafting the dyed and silvered ostrich feathers and
incense burners that fanned her air, and laying down the rose petals
upon which she habitually walked, and sweeping them up in her wake,
and carrying her enormous silk train like some great living fishtail, and
plucking the small instruments from which emerged the aura of sound
that she always bore with her. Smiling down at me, actually taking my
bare hand in her own gloved one for a few moments, she asked if I was
feeling better. Despite the obvious stupidity of my accident, she was in a
forgiving mood. She told me how she had briefly feared for the worst, and
had had the family tombs re-surveyed and this ancestral bed restored in

case the journey of my fever should take me further than this earth. I nodded and smiled as pain and surprise receded. Looking up at the tumbling, fruited carvings, I realized why I had dimly recognized this structure; I had come across it in on my wanderings through the vast store-rooms which formed part of the hidden landscape of this house.

"The arrangements for our journey south," she told me, "are too far advanced to be postponed. Contracts have been set. Visits have been promised. Sacrifices have been made. Feasts and entertainments have been agreed. Money, above all, has been paid. Your father and I will be traveling downriver as usual, but we have discussed the matter and decided that it would be impossible for you to come with us in your current state. You will remain here through the winter in our homestead, and your body will heal. Everything has been arranged."

A glorious vision, a jewel set within the perfumed glitter of her chiming, wafting attendants, she turned from me and the curtains fell back.

My parents saw to it that I was provided with tutors to teach me things I was no longer interested in learning, and priests to remind me of the doings of Gods in whom I was certain that I no longer believed. Visits were also arranged from acquaintances and relatives, and reports required of them and me. I was given a pet parrot to keep me entertained—which soon flew out of a window to reappear a few days later as a sprawl of rainbow feathers in the frost. But, more than ever, there was no human company I was prepared to tolerate beyond my own.

It did occasionally strike me that the scene that my progress made through the house and grounds was rather extraordinary, even if it is something that you, reader, will regularly see passing beneath your window if you live in a city. But, with little else to occupy my thoughts, I was intrigued by the complexity and variety of the process by which the hob retinues bore my newly disabled self along. As our house was as rich in mirrors as our garden was in ponds, I was even able to study the strange manner of my progress as if I was watching someone else. There was the *simple half-crouch*, wherein two or three hobs would position themselves almost as if they were sitting as we humans do. I would recline on the silks and cushions that they had arranged upon their bodies, whilst four or six other hobs beneath that top layer would contort their backs in a variety of postures to provide the necessary motive power and support. For stairs and slopes, there was the position that I called the *rolling back*, during which a dozen or so hobs, more if necessary, would lay themselves face-upward across the ascent, and push the rolling knot of upper hobs which still actually supported me up or down. Then there was *hands over arms* for the steeper ascents as the hobs formed something like a stairway of limbs, and, most strange of all, what I thought of as *the hob carpet* in which, once I had signed that I was weary of being seated and wanted to stretch my still-functioning limbs, my tumbling, ever-changing retinue would briefly contrive to convey me upright as though I were walking, yet still supporting my splinted leg as if it were not broken at all.

Here I was, riding about every day on my writhing throne of hob flesh, and also submitting to the sort of attentions that are otherwise usually

reserved for infants, the elderly, the lazy, or the infirm. There is, it has to be admitted, a smoothly addictive quality to reaching toward something that lies beyond the span of your arms, only to find a moment later that you are actually holding it. It does not take much further effort, I can well imagine, to enjoy having your food chewed and every other conceivable outward process of your body performed on your behalf.

My bathroom lay along a corridor adjoining my suite of rooms. Each morning, I was lifted from my bed by the gentle touch of dozens of hands. Still supine and still half-asleep, I had leisure to see aspects of my surroundings that I had never previously noticed. Gazing up, I saw now how the long, high ceiling was marvellously arched, and spangled with fragments of polished stone. The bathroom itself was a larger room, its great heights dripping with candelabra that, in the dark of those winter mornings, glowed with thousands of candles freshly lit by an invisible army of hobs. This light played on tiles and marbles and filigree embrasures; it shone across the dreams of some long-dead architect rendered material by the labors of hobs even longer gone. It's a scene, reader, which I imagine you can probably picture from your own abode. In fact, you may well scoff at the plainness of my description, for if there is one thing we humans are good at creating, it's structures that involve the near-endless labor of hands other than our own. My bath itself was a simple affair, consisting of nothing more than a deep, steaming lake of white marble. The same hands and arms that had borne me from my bed now subtly divested me of my nightclothes and laid me afloat amid islands of rose petals and scented candles. They somehow even managed to support and keep dry my splinted left leg.

All in all, it was an untroublesome way to start the day. Often enough as I drifted back toward easy sleep and the continuation of my dreams, it was barely a start at all. Inevitably, being male and of the age I was, these half-sleeps had a certain effect upon my anatomy. When I fully awoke, I would find that my member was rigid. That solitary winter, cradled by hands and steam, I discovered the means of dealing with this state.

I felt no particular shame as the signs of my morning's activities were washed away by the subtle hands that supported me. But I did feel an odd sense of curiosity. Sexual activity, even of this simplest sort, is peculiar in that way; I found myself wondering if this one thing could be done, why not others. Not, I have to say, that I was particularly experimental, but I soon discovered that I enjoyed the way the hands which supported me touched other aspects of my body as I reached the height of my satisfaction. Soon, I was commanding the hands to do this or that. In truth, once a small moment of initial resistance had passed, they required little encouragement.

The snows came rolling down from the mountains on dense banks of cloud that seemed far too dark to be capable of containing anything so miraculously white. Slowly, my leg healed. My cast was removed at the physician's directions and replaced by a light splint. I was encouraged to bathe. And, in each of those many baths, the contortions that I demanded of my retinue of hob flesh became more elaborate. Soon, the use of my own hand to pleasure myself became redundant, and I made use of a

twisting, ever-changing array of hob vaginas, hob breasts, hob mouths, and hob anuses. Then the water itself became an annoyance. By now, I was capable of walking, but I often chose instead to transport myself naked amid a writhing orgy. I tumbled though the echoing corridors and staterooms of my homestead amid a many-limbed, -backed and -buttocked fist of mingled hob and human flesh.

The snows abated, the canals brimmed and the Great North Water roared with meltwater beneath the battlements. I was able to walk unaided and without a stick by the time my family retinue returned, but, looking down at the flotilla of craft as it moved and flashed upstream in the bright spring Sun, I saw the flutter of black flags and heard the trumpets of mourning.

My mother greeted me a day or two later in the chapel she had established within her quarters at the house. A dark grotto had been created within one of the great halls, set about with huge stones and ferns and moss to signify the entrance to the underworld. A waterfall hissed, and many diamonds were scattered across the flower-bedecked turf that had been laid across the usual tiles, in echo of tears she was supposed to have shed.

"Well," she said, looking me up and down as I entered this odd place to greet her. Dappled light played. She looked magnificent in black. "I am pleased to note that at least some of our prayers and sacrifices have been answered in this time of great loss." She gave a small sigh. Her retinue of hobs wailed and beat their bloodied torsos with flails. "Although I believe that the Gods were right to call your father when they did. In fact, I almost wish they'd done so sooner. He'd become weak and lazy long before the fever that struck him. It's up to you now, my darling, to be the man he once was."

My father's body processed upriver in the great boat of his funerary bed through Dhiol and beyond the forests of Severland toward our family tombs in the Roof of the World once the embalmers had finished their work. We disembarked onto a carved obsidian platform that traversed the polished face of a great glacier on a complex system of ropes. The great mountains were all around us now, and I longed for quiet to contemplate the frailty of life and the vastness of eternity—but I still couldn't help but notice odd and irrelevant things. How, for example, the teams of hobs who worked all these pulleys wore scarcely any more clothing in this frozen land than their compatriots did in the lowlands, while we humans shivered in furs.

Our passage into the final chamber that my father had spent many years constructing was lit by clever arrangements of ice and mirrors. Carved here were scenes from his life reproduced with a scale and a grandeur that already placed him amid the Gods. My mother and I stepped back from his gold sarcophagus. The priests were retreating, and the final doors were already closing off the light. We were not just leaving my father behind, but enough supplies to ensure that he did not go lacking in the afterlife. In fact, a worrying amount of our family possessions

lay strewn around us. Great trees under whose shade I had once studied had been uprooted and placed within huge pots. There were whole libraries of scrolls, and paintings and statues and chairs and rugs, not to mention a veritable farmyard of animals, whose soundings and smellings the priests did their best to combat with their clamor and incense. Inevitably, amid all the wealth that my father would bring to the underworld, there were also dozens of hobs. They, though, sat in a quiet huddle. The panic, I supposed, would come later as they began to realize that the labors of others of their kind had not only sealed off all light from this tomb, but also air.

"Well," my mother sighed as we stood outside again once all the doors had slammed shut and the splendid white of the mountains gleamed around us, "that's half a fortune gone."

Although I worked hard as a merchant, I realize now that my heart was always elsewhere, although exactly *where* still remains in doubt. I certainly enjoyed the sights and the journeyings. I liked meeting people from other lands, and finding out about how they lived their lives. But the stuff of actually doing business with them, of starting at one price and working around to another after many hours or days of mock outrage and subterfuge, left me bored. These were also seasons of unexpected rains, bad harvests and broken bridges, when the rich became cautious, and the merely well off decided they weren't so well off after all.

It came as no surprise when my mother broached the subject of marriage. In every way, it was sensible for us to make alliance with another family of similar means to our own. By any standards, though, Kinbel was a great catch. A daughter of the priesthood, she was so exquisitely educated as to make my own knowledge seem half-made. Her eyes were amber. Her skin was like polished jet. She moved with the grace of a statue come to life. Above all, though, she brought fresh money and influence. In retrospect, I realize that, beneath all her layers of accomplishment, Kinbel was something of an innocent, but, in the few words and glances that she and I were allowed to exchange before the ceremonies of our wedding began, I found it hard to see beyond her outer perfection.

Being a union in which the priests were more than ever involved, the gutters that had been laid for that special purpose in the gardens of our homestead ran red with blood for days. It's a rarely noticed truth that, with the possible exception of whories, priests are alone amongst us humans in doing anything resembling real physical work. There's certainly no doubt that the removal of an entire hob skin in one untorn piece, leaving only the hands and feet remaining on the shuddering carcass like shoes and gloves, is a feat of manual skill so great that one might almost call it hobbish. Granted, though, that the labor of many other hobs was then required to smooth out and stitch this gathering mass, while still warm and dripping, into one vast sheet, which was then folded over and tented in such a way as to create a roof and floor—indeed a carpet—of hob flesh.

The drumming and the ululations reached new heights as Kinbel and I

finally descended the offal-strew steps from our separate thrones so that we might complete our tryst inside the weird structure that had been created for us below. A flap, which seemed to be made entirely of eyelessly peering hob faces, was pulled back. Kinbel and I then found ourselves standing together—but, inevitably, not alone—inside a rank cave.

I remember thinking, as Kinbel was finally divested of all her raiments, that, with her upturned breasts and sculpted thighs, she really was too beautiful to be real. I even remember staring at her perfect feet in the bloodied, pinkish light, and admiring the pearly sheen of her toenails. I was naked by now myself, but I had, as so often happens, become over-absorbed in odd abstractions. When I finally tried to meet her gaze, I saw that she was looking down toward my flaccid penis. I imagine that she had been told that such small obstacles were to be expected on a day of such magnitude, and a murmur of anticipation and delight went up amid the watching priests as she stepped forward, twined her arms around me, and pressed her mouth against my own.

What was suddenly the most important part of my body still remained ignorantly unresponsive. Sex had ceased to interest me in the years since my early solitary experiments, and I found it still left me disinterested now. But Kinbel was persistent. She drew me back and down until more and more of my body was in contact with the carpet of flayed flesh, which was inlaid as if by jewels with bits of hob ear, hob nipple, and hob nose. Now, as Kinbel reached out to me and the priests cried out and clattered their bells, my member finally responded, and the necessary work was soon done.

It was thus in a spirit of genuine optimism that I entered married life. Kinbel was, I kept telling myself, all and more than I could have hoped for. We took informal solitary walks with no more than a few dozen hobs as our retinue. We even ate in the same room. People commented on how she and I made a fine couple in the statues that were being carved as a prelude to the commencement of work on our tombs. It was hard not to enjoy her presence; how she moved, the dark, sweet sound of her voice. Although my mother was avoiding these colder climes and spending more and more of her time in the warmer south, Kinbel charmed even her.

If Kinbel and I had differences, they manifested themselves at first in the way that she would protest about statements I made against things being merely the work of the Gods. I could scarcely credit that someone so obviously intelligent could imagine that the Sun had to be persuaded to rise through a thousand daily sacrifices on the steps of the great temple at Ulan Dor, or that there was meaning to be drawn from a random spill of intestines, or the shapes of the clouds.

But in the background lay a different problem. One which struck me at first as vanishingly small. As small, in fact, as my penis which, since its efforts during our marriage ceremony, had shrunk back into flaccid reticence and stubbornly refused to perform. Our marriage bed was a vast thing, cushioned and canopied on a scale more than large enough to allow both of us to lose each other and a hundred others in untroubled sleep, but Kinbel returned to me night after night across its soft landscapes with small entreaties, then more and more extravagant seduc-

tions, all of which, although I was able to appreciate their invention and aesthetic merit, left a crucial part of me cold.

"Why is it . . ." she asked finally, kneeling before me in the lamplit smog of incense and chimes that she had created on that particular night, her ebony body emblazoned with curlicues of gold, ". . . why is it that you could do this thing so easily on the evening of our marriage, and yet never since? Would it help, for example, if I summoned your mother to watch again?"

"My mother would scarcely thank you for such an invitation, Kinbel," I muttered, still feigning half-sleep underneath a landslide of pillows.

"Then perhaps the prayers of the priests of my father's sphere do not reach us as easily here as they might. We could arrange for some acolytes to place themselves in the higher reaches of this bed."

That was too much. I sat up. "Does it matter so very much? Is this a question of offspring, or pure inheritance—"

"Inheritance!" She barked a laugh so ferocious that I drew back. "Is *that* what you think this is about? Can't a man and a woman do that for which the Gods made them in their own marriage bed out of nothing more than sheer affection and joy?"

Affection. Joy. Even spoken in her delicious voice, the human words sounded odd. "If it's the mere act you want, Kinbel," I suggested, "couldn't you visit one of the houses that I believe have discreet doorways in the west of Dhiol?"

Now she was silent. Her eyes were shining. For the first time in my life, it struck me that human females are perhaps more different from the male than the small variations of our anatomy imply.

"Wouldn't that deal with the problem, and perhaps even furnish the heir that you appear to desire?" I continued. "Believe me, Kinbel, no one would rejoice more than I if—"

"You don't understand. All I want to know from you is, is . . . what is it that I have to do to persuade you to make love?" A tear joined with the gilded swirls on Kinbel's left breast. "I've tried dressing and undressing," she muttered. "I've tried dancing and not dancing. Do you want me here? Or in this place instead? Even that, I really would not mind. Nor this. Whatever you want of me I would enjoy. Nothing would bother me as much as . . . this nothing at all. Or would you like me to summon some other priestesses to join in our couplings as well? Or priests? Perhaps a pack of the sacred dogs? You even mentioned, I recall, a parrot that you were briefly fond of. I'm not sure how such congress might be arranged, and I've certainly put on and taken off enough feathers, but if you really think—"

"Enough! Enough!" By now I was covering my ears. I was shuddering like a flayed hob.

Instead of turning away from me and shifting across to her own encampment in this land of cushion and silks, Kinbel drew closer. And she did a strange thing. She placed her naked hand across my own. "There must be something of this world that you desire beyond mere ideas. There *must* be something, and I'd like to help find it, no matter what it is. We could pray. We could call for sacrifices. We could sport ourselves naked in the purest

snow. For all I care—and happily I would do this—we could frolic with the rats in the sewers. After all, there was that one time at the ceremonies of our betrothal, when seemingly the task was most difficult. And yet you managed.” She gave a softer laugh. “I’m starting to talk like you, as if this were a terrible task, some difficult matter of enormous work . . .”

Her voice was trailing off now, and the pressure of her hand was loosening against my own. I knew that if I did not speak now, I never would. “There *is* something,” I croaked. “Or there was. Once . . .”

Speaking in a low voice, as the candles guttered and the chimes stilled and the last of the smoke of the incense settled like mist into the hollows of mattress and coverlet, I told Kinbel about my winter alone, and my shameful, as it seemed to me now, congress with that retinue of hobs. And all the time I spoke, the pressure of Kinbel’s hand against my own remained unchanged. Only when I had finished, and I feared that my own eyes were shining as much as hers, did she lean forward. I felt the strange press of her lips against my face.

“Have you not heard,” her voice murmured into my ear, “that no human congress is considered worthy of the name without the assistance of a few hobs in fashionable circles in Yoha and Halu? In Jasih Noish, apparently, many use them as beds. And everyone knows the stories of gangmasters, and no one ever thinks less of them for it, or even cares. It’s not, I confess, a variety of love for which . . .” I heard a click in her throat. “Something for which I previously felt any strong attraction. But now that you have told me I would be happy and proud to summon as many hobs as you desire. Indeed, they could be trained in such arts. I would willingly submit—”

Something broke within me. Flapping angrily at pillows and fabrics, I pulled away from Kinbel’s hold. “I don’t want you to submit to *anything*! I don’t want you to drag some army of hobs into this dreary cage of silks. I don’t *love* hobs. I don’t even desire them—or at least not now. It was just some childhood fancy that lingered for too long in some lost part of my brain. A taste I briefly acquired and then discarded. All I care about now is knowledge. All I want to find are ways of understanding the world. Why can’t *you* understand that, Kinbel—and then, by all those ridiculous Gods that you seem to hold so dear, just leave me alone!”

The next morning, and after a night undisturbed by further entreaties, I woke up to find that I had slept alone. Kinbel had left word at my breakfast table that she would reside for the time being in her father’s temple-house in Dhiol. I felt a twinge of guilty delight as I read the papyrus. Without Kinbel, and with my father dead, and my mother gone to the warmer south, and but for the presence of a few gangmasters, I finally had my homestead entirely to myself. Walking the battlements in the breezy Sunshine, I decided that seeing to the maintenance of this place would be the task to which I would apply myself from now on.

It’s not that I ceased being a merchant, but there was something about the needs of my homestead that inspired me in a way that the mere business of buying and selling had never done on its own. I found bargaining was far more to my liking if, instead of taking money and promises of goods, I asked for labor and skills, or even plain advice. Other businessmen were

surprisingly happy to lend me their roofing or drainage hobs once they had overcome their incredulity that this was something I was genuinely prepared to accept. It didn't take long for me to enhance my already growing reputation for eccentricity as I drew deals based on recovered slates and sacks of mortar. Let people stare, I thought. Let them say that I have lost all sense. Let them call me a fool and—yes, even then—a lover of hobs.

I believe that particular phrase came from several sources. It probably began with my endless questioning of gangmasters. Word may also have seeped out from my bedtime confession to Kinbel. Not, I remain certain, that Kinbel herself would have deliberately spread such a slur, but she was probably innocent enough to imagine that the confessional with a priest was sacrosanct, even if that priest happened to be her father. In any case, *hob lover* is a common enough term of abuse in some lands. I didn't care—or at least not so very much.

My gangmasters were required to have daily meetings. There, we discussed not just the quickest and easiest ways of getting their individual duties performed, but how we all might benefit the smooth running of the homestead. When the owners of other homesteads were complaining about the poor summers and the vicious winters, I was doing better than ever. I had no time now for the fripperies of planting and ornamentation that my mother had encouraged. Even within the house itself, I was more than happy to see some of the staterooms being used for storage or as hob workshops rather than being left waiting for the grand dances and ceremonies that I had no desire to hold. I think I convinced a few doubters, although those who came to visit generally returned to Dhiol with stories of the increasing roughness of my dwelling, and the Godless way in which I went about my work. That, and my apparent kindness to all creatures of my homestead, which of course included hobs. It seemed self-evident to me that persuasion and reward worked better than punishment, and that it was better to keep and cherish something rather than to let it die of neglect or sacrifice. But stories began to circulate as a result, although most of them were false. Threats were made. The priests of Dhiol grew restless. But I was content. Now that I had my homestead in a state of productivity and order that exceeded all of my neighbors', I was free to investigate all the many things which continued to puzzle me about this world.

I discovered that domestic pigs and the wild boars of the forest can be mated, and that they produce an offspring that has good, strongly flavored meat, and can be left to forage out of doors. I learned that milk, if turned over in a machine of my own design, separates into different, and entirely useful, parts. I also found out that most of my hob gangmasters, my old educator Karik included, had a poor knowledge of the more detailed aspects of hob signing, and used the stick or the whip too easily when they failed to get things properly done.

I set out to learn more about communicating directly with the hobs. There was a quietness and a sense of withdrawing as, crouched inside the low walls of their crude and stinking dwellings, and often without even the company of a gangmaster, I watched and prodded and questioned and cajoled. Hobs are generally uncomfortable in human presence, and they grew all the more so when they realized I had grown capable of telling in-

dividuals apart merely from their facial features, and then that I had worked out the grunts and gestures of some of their names. Disputes arose. I believe deaths occurred. The world of hobs is, in many ways, as savage as our own. They perform upon themselves the common mutilations that we require, choose nominations for sacrifice, and are fierce in securing what we humans would consider to be laughably small distinctions in status, although I was unable to find any proof of the common slur that hob mothers routinely eat their own young.

But I was pleased by what I learned. Knowing hobbish to an extent that now made my gangmasters redundant, I came to understand hobs' tribal rivalries and separations, and set about issuing my own instructions to the lead hob of each freshly organized gang. I was certain that the drains were being cut more efficiently, and fields better hoed, as a result. I developed ever greater plans. Even as the forests of Severland died and produce shrank in the markets of Dhiol, I was convinced that every homestead in this northerly land could remain fertile and productive if only it were better run.

I was stripped to the waist in a ditch with some hobs one morning and demonstrating how they should install some new ceramic pipework when I looked up and saw a figure outlined against the grey sky above. So unused was I to any other kind of company that I'd grunted and signed in hobbish before I realized that the figure was human, and female, and then that it was my wife.

Kinbel smiled away my apologies as I climbed out. After all, she was plainly dressed, and had come alone without warning, or retinue.

"I've been hearing so many tales. I thought it was time that I found out." She looked around her. The fields that we had once thought might belong to both of us shone with new growth. "And I can see that you're doing well."

"I think I am." Signaling for a towel from the gang of hobs, I wiped myself down. "I believe that this place will one day be seen as a way forward."

Kinbel chuckled. The sound had lost none of its beauty. Neither had she, plainly dressed, unadorned and alone though she was. "All I hear in Dhiol is that you live with the hobs, and that you treat the Gods as if they do not exist."

I shrugged. We were standing on a muddy pathway. The whole aspect of the landscape that surrounded us had lost the posturing grandeur that it had once possessed, but it seemed to me to be yet more beautiful in its simplicity and efficiency. All the more so now that Kinbel was here.

"This place." She turned around, and I saw the sky and the fields mirrored in her eyes. "It's nothing like I imagined. Yet I think that you are wrong to tell yourself this is not the work of the Gods. The Gods work through people as well, you know. I imagine that they even work through simple hobs. But tell me, that structure over there. . . ?"

I was delighted by her interest. No longer the innocent, she had grown and changed. She was particularly amused when I described how merchants squabbled over a single crumb of gold, then yielded at the suggestion that they give me a drainage screw that, with a few repairs, was worth far more.

"You must see us as wasteful," she said as I showed her the beasts of the stable, and the stinking lake of effluent that would feed next year's fields.

"Us?"

"I mean people. Humans."

A silence fell between us as we walked on.

"Your mother sends her regards," she told me as she stood at the homestead gates. It was starting to rain. "She wants you to be reassured that many sacrifices have been made in the most holy of sites on your behalf."

"You don't still think that your Gods are so stupid and angry as to be appeased by hob blood, do you, Kinbel?"

Kinbel looked at me in that dauntingly composed way she had. "What you believe does not alter the punishment the Gods are inflicting upon our world."

There was no doubt, by now, that our summers were shortening and our winters were growing more harsh. The white blaze of the Roof of the World had spread, and the growth of its glaciers threatened to destroy many family tombs. Even in the sacred homelands in the south to which my mother had retreated, the nights were apparently showing teeth of frost, and the inundations of the God River threatened the temples of Ulan Dor. The processes of my agricultural research were long-winded and often frustrating, but I was certain that my discoveries would soon be crucial. I tried to tell her more, but she held up a hand to make me stop.

"What you've done here, and what you are doing is—well, it's everything you say. But there are things you don't understand. People in Dhiol are saying bad things about you—"

"They've been doing so for years." I gave a dismissive wave even as I felt a flush come into my cheeks.

"That may be so, but it has gone far above mere personal abuse. You probably know better than anyone that times are hard. But when times are hard, people look around for something to blame. Or, better still, someone."

"No one can be so stupid as to hold me responsible for the weather!"

I still expected her to laugh and shake her head, but she looked at me gravely, and nodded. "Exactly so. It is even spoken of amongst us priests."

"Can't you do anything about it?"

"Can't *you*?"

"What?"

"If you acknowledged the Gods a little, and talked less to your hobs, that might be a start. But you must do so quickly. Otherwise, I fear that it will be too late."

"And so?"

"Then, if you do not listen, all that you have done and stand for will go to waste."

I blustered in reply, shouting that she was being ridiculous, that it was the fault of her kind—her and all the others—but already she was turning, walking off through the rain.

They came on a winter's night. By then, I had long been expecting them. I had even considered reinstating my homestead into the fortress it

had once been, but its walls were enfeebled despite the fine cliff-face it presented to the river, and the waste of such an enterprise appalled me even more than the prospect of what was to come.

It was an impressive sight that I looked down on from the battlements along which I had once debated the number of petals in a flower and the shining of the stars. This was certainly no random mob. It was a river of light, and of chanting, and of bells. Some of the priests rode on elephants. Others were transported by oxen on glinting wagons of sapphire and gold. The landowners came with their gangmasters, and the merchants with their suppliers and storeholders, and all around them dripped flaming sconces, and everywhere there was a humming and a clashing of gongs. The crowd was huge, and it was organized in a way that was reminiscent of the great southern ceremonies which are said to sustain the workings of the Sun, the God River and the Moon. And, like any other human crowd, it consisted mostly of hobs. They steered and goaded the elephants and oxen, and scooped up the ordure left behind. They carried huge braziers, which shone like giant coals, to keep the procession warm. They bore the tall poles and vast banners that would provide shade or shelter should there be rain or snow or Sun. They carried many of the lazier and fatter members of the general population in sedan chairs, or rolled and writhed to support their bodies in muscled engines of livery and tattoo. And it seemed to me, as the chants and the voices rose up to me, that even the accusations of my being a godless renegade, a devil-worshiper, a non-human, a lover of hobs, came mostly in the distinctive rhythm and grunt of the voices of hobs themselves.

I looked at my small gang of hobs that stood behind me in the flickering light that was thrown up through the chill darkness. They kept the same distance from me they always kept, as if still awaiting orders. They still behaved, the thought struck me, like any other retinue, even my mother's, although they were somewhat more roughly clothed. But I could tell them apart well enough to understand that they felt emotions almost as a human might, and that they were far more afraid than I was. I had already relinquished the rest of my establishment of hobs, either through selling them in markets distant from my tainted reputation in Dhiol, or by simply releasing them, and signing them to ford the river and head north, where I believed they stood a better chance of surviving than we humans did in this increasingly hostile world.

What do you want of us now? The lead hob, who, in a fit of nostalgia, I had chosen to call Gog Two, signed to me, and I looked back at him, and for the first time in my recollection, he met my gaze without turning away. He was a sturdy creature, beetle-browed and heavy-set, with particularly large and agile hands. How he disciplined his colleagues was in many ways harsher than any gangmaster, but it was always directed toward getting the job done. I thought of him as fair-minded, and I liked to imagine he thought of me in a similar way.

Nothing. I made the simple signal of reply that any human might make when they have no immediate need of their hobs. But instead of simply remaining where they were and waiting for their next command, he and the rest turned from me and began to walk away, moving with that char-

acteristic gait that hobs have. Then, without any obvious exchange of grunt or signal, they broke into a run.

I watched them vanish along the battlements, and down the steps, scurrying out of sight across the darkness of the homestead's muddled fields that had once been a delicate checkerboard of gardens, heading toward the gates I had left open on the far side. Then I turned back toward the procession, which now lapped in a glittering tide beneath my homestead's walls. I clambered up onto the lip of the battlements. I raised my arms, and felt stillness shiver out beneath me as the chanting ceased, and with it the rhythm of bells, as light trembled on ten thousand upturned faces. I almost threw myself down at that moment into the fine, living carpet of both human and hob that lay spread beneath me; perhaps that was even what was expected. But I drew back, even though I often wish that I had leapt.

After the initial beatings and cursings when I was blindfolded and chained and taken into Dhiol, I was treated well enough. I was imprisoned in rooms in a high tower of the Temples of the Moon, which looked down on the many courtyards, balconied gardens, ziggurats, and raised terraces where the priests regularly performed their exulted work. Beyond that, glowering through clouds or blazing white in the light of the Sun or the Moon, lay the ever-mightier peaks of the Roof of the World. In many ways, my lodgings reminded me of the tower where I had dwelt as a child. If anything, the furnishings and decorations were more sumptuous, although, by priestly standards, they probably seemed rough.

For many Moons, I was left to fend for myself. My only visitors were a daily attendance of hobs, who were not only mute and castrated, but rendered deaf and sightless as well. These strange, sad creatures moved by touch alone, although they seemed able to sense my presence by what I eventually decided was body heat, and skirted around me with the slow caution of a chameleon stalking its prey along a branch. When I tried touching their scarred and naked bodies, they scuttled back with alarming speed across the walls and floors. But they left me food and water, and a few buckets and crude implements that, once I had finished using them, they took away again. After my initial nightmares about the ingenuity of the tortures that the priests, of all people, were capable of devising, I decided that this was to be my punishment: to have to do the things which no self-respecting human would ever expect to have to do unaided and alone.

If that was the punishment that had been intended, it was a failure. I remained fascinated by life's processes, even those that ended up in a bucket. I soon realized, for example, that a huge source of extra fertility went to waste by our peevish refusal to feed the land with human manure. And I found comfort in the simple preparation of food. Peeling an apple or a raw carrot can be an eminently enjoyable task, and the dissection of a slab of meat always carried the promise that I might find out something new about the structure of animal musculature. And I enjoyed shaving as well, the careful craft of steering a soaped blade across my jaw, which was something I had never thought to do myself.

Outside the window, and despite the glories of the architecture, the scene was less elevating. These priests of the Moon seemed to have little else to

do with their time other than perform sacrifices. As the silver sphere that they worshipped processed and re-processed across the sky in its changing quadrants, I heard the cries and screams of many of my own hobs. They soon even reduced the resourceful and resilient Gog Two to a whimpering mess of bared flesh and bone. I supposed it was inevitable that the hobs that I had released into the wild would soon be caught. After all, the only life they had ever known was one of servitude and captivity. But it struck me as perverse that the priests should also track down, and then presumably re-purchase, the many other hundreds of hobs that I had legitimately sold. No doubt, they thought it was a fine spectacle, to kill the beasts that I had supposedly loved on specially raised platforms within my earshot and sight, and by methods that were even more ingenious than I had feared, and which were often almost impossibly slow.

Maybe they hoped to drive me to madness, although the chants I heard from beyond the temple's outer walls credited me with being mad already, and more evil than the foulest enemies of the Gods. But if there was one thing that my life, like the life of any other well-placed human, had prepared me for, it was the spectacle of hob sacrifice. Even though I understood the pleading gestures and moans in ways of which few other humans are capable, and was disgusted by the agony and the waste, I remained somehow unmoved.

If there truly was a pain that I was put through during my captivity, it was the perverse one of not caring and hurting enough. In my darkest times, I even began to wonder if people were right, and that I really was different—some kind of monster who lacked some crucial spark or spirit, or even soul.

The seasons came and went with or without the aid of the priests, and grew increasingly cold. I took special delight in the return of a flock of swallows that I knew journeyed far downriver each winter to seek the better climes of the lands beyond Ulan Dor. They came to nest above my windows, and I watched the superb flight of the parents as they brought beakfuls of insects to feed their squeaking young.

It was on such a morning as I was staring from my window—for once, no sacrifices were going on, for which blessing I truly praised the Gods—and pleasantly lost in thought as I considered the play of the seasons and the way in which all life seemed to respond, that I heard an unusual noise: the turn of a key in my outer door. Not that my mute lizard hobs didn't still visit me, but their pattern was strict, and they only came at night. Even more extraordinary, then, was the unmistakable sound of human footsteps, and of a human voice.

"Are you in here? Are you alive?"

I found myself frozen despite the relatively warm light in which I sat. It wasn't just that it was Kinbel's voice; it was that it was anyone's at all.

She ducked beneath the low stone arch. She was wearing a plain, hooded cape. "I'd imagined somewhere far worse than this. . . ."

It had been so long a time since I had spoken to anyone that I opened and closed my mouth like a frog.

"See, I've brought you gifts." She put down a bag and pulled back her

hood and gave a laugh, which sounded almost like the Kinbel of old. But not quite; she wasn't any less beautiful, but she had changed. Her face was sharper, and so was her gaze. She still moved with grace, but it was a grace that reminded me of the swallows, or even of my mute hobs. It had that edge of wariness, and of caution, which all creatures that are preyed upon possess. "I wondered if you could use a mirror, although I thought twice about bringing one. But you look well enough. I should have brought scissors, though." She smiled. "Your hair isn't quite the current fashion."

"Here, here . . ." My own voice sounded even odder than hers as, courteous as a hob, I brushed down my only chair and turned it around. "There must be a lot of stairs to climb to get up here."

"Indeed there are." She sat down. Her hair had streaks in it, silver amid the dark. Fine lines drew around her eyes as she squinted against the window's light. "What's that sound?"

"That? Those are my birds." I felt my mouth shape a smile. "Not that I own them, of course. Or anything now. They come and go with the seasons, and return to exactly the same spot. They help keep me occupied."

"Birds—the whole way you look at things. You haven't changed so very much."

"I'm sorry."

"No, no." She shook her head. "I meant that as a compliment."

It was strange to talk to a human again. I felt my face flush.

Kinbel told me about the outer world. Things were as bad as I imagined, but life went on. My homestead had been possessed by the priests of her father's own sphere, and then sold on at what, I pleased to note, was a considerable price, even if the priests had kept it all. The new owners imagined that they would be able to maintain the place as profitably as I had done, and I was even more pleased to learn that they had failed. My homestead was deserted now, apparently. So were many others. People were heading south, but, unlike my birds, they weren't returning.

"Your mother does well, or so the occasional communications that cross the storms in the Bounded Ocean assure me. She has remarried, of course. You didn't know? Stupid of me—how could you . . . The way she put it, some kind of new alliance was essential because you have dragged the family name so low. She believes that she performs an important task in parading in pomp along the golden avenues of Thris. The way I hear it from my other contacts, she seems to be in so many places at once that people speculate that she employs two or three fake retinues, who process with all the usual scents and bells and awnings and rose petals by which she characterizes herself. But without her at the center, of course."

"That hardly seems to matter."

"No. For her, perhaps it does not."

"You and I, Kinbel—are we still married? I mean, if we are, and if it causes you embarrassment—I mean, more than embarrassment . . ."

Kinbel looked at me. She still had that way of doing so. "Yes, we are married. Or at least as married as we ever were. Which isn't saying so very much. I still even get inquiries from the stonemasons who are storing the statues of ourselves we once had made. They ask if there isn't more work we should be doing if we are to gain the afterlife we deserve."

"Perhaps we'll get that anyway."

"Yes. Perhaps."

"And it doesn't bother you?"

"What? Being married but having no husband? Or not possessing a tomb? Or lacking a name I can safely proclaim—or a homestead I can call my own?"

I'd forgotten about those flares of anger; I'd forgotten how strange and unpredictable people can be. But the glare in her eyes subsided almost as quickly as it had come. In that, at least, she hadn't changed.

"No. We remain married. No one else would have me now even if I were not. In fact, I think it suits my priesthood to have me thus. Not that I've been asked to disown you. But I know that I will."

I felt a chill pass over me. "What do you mean?"

"Oh. I see. You imagined that this was the end of things—that you would be kept up here until you expired? I'm sorry, but that's never been the plan. There will be a . . . I think the word they use is 'trial.' A special hall is being built for the purpose. I believe you can probably see it from that window. Unlike the rest of us humans, you will be called to judgment in this life rather than the next."

"And punished?"

Her look melted. She rose from her chair. I believe she would have moved toward me, perhaps even embraced me, had I not shrunk back. "I should never have said . . ."

"No, no. It's important that I understand. And I had wondered what that huge new building that all those thousands of hobs are clambering to construct was, although I'd never have been arrogant enough to imagine it had anything to do with me."

"Oh, you're famous." She sat back down again. All the old distance between us had returned. "The priests wish to make you so."

Kinbel went soon after, having left the contents of her bag. There was a mirror, as she had promised—although it was removed that evening by the creeping hobs, and the knives that I was given thereafter to prepare my food and shave myself were so blunt as to be useless; it had never occurred to me before that I was being watched. Kinbel also gave me spices for cooking, which I was happy to experiment with. She had even obtained some scrolls that, although they were couched in the ridiculous language of the priests, recorded several useful aspects of natural science. But what pleased me most were the blank scraps of papyrus and small cake of ink; both that she should think of bringing such a gift, and that I was finally free to write.

Now, at last, I could put my ideas down.

Above all, I kept thinking of those arrow-tailed birds. The priests, I discovered in one of the scrolls Kinbel had left me, took their coming to these northerly lands as an augury, and had recorded their precise numbers and the Moon of their arrival for thousands of years. There were far less now, and I wondered as I watched the swallows swoop among the spires at the many that must die during each long journey.

Here my heart started racing. Those creatures that flew and thrived

the best, the thought rushed over me, would survive and produce offspring, while those that didn't would not. I'd be lying if I said that the rest came easily. But, looking back, I can see that it was but a small leap to consider that not only a change in habit might produce better chances of survival, but also that the types of alterations which I had deliberately been engendering in my homestead's crops and livestock would surely occur naturally as well.

After her first visit, Kinbel came to see me with every Moon. She brought news of the outside world, although she often seemed almost as distant from such goings-on as I felt myself. Far more importantly, she brought fresh writing materials. Soon, as well, she arrived with bundles of scrolls on the specific subjects I'd started to request. It would never have occurred to me to look for information about the natural world within sacred texts, but here was everything I could ever need recorded over aeons in pedantic priestly detail. I even tried to tell Kinbel about my vision, in which every type of beast and tree and plant and insect had changed and developed over aeons in response to the demands of its surroundings. And she appeared to listen, and sometimes even to understand.

"And if the pig and the boar are related," she once said, "if a tree and a bush are sisters, if the fish that inhabit the oceans are remote cousins of those in our rivers, what does that make us?"

"Of course, of course. That is why I need to find out more! That taxation scroll on the categorization of different crops from the first dynasty you found for me was excellent, but perhaps there's something similar about livestock, or even fruit. . . ?"

Outside, through the freezing mists, the great hall of my trial gathered its many roofs and domes, but it seemed vague, insubstantial compared to my theories and thoughts. I found it hard to believe that Kinbel's world, with all the gossip and ceremonies and money of which she talked, was real.

Her eyes were reddened. She sniffed. She looked weary and drawn. "I'm sorry. I have some small malaise that our priests cannot cure. Everyone seems to be possessed by it. Perhaps it's this cold summer. I do sometimes wonder if we humans were ever meant to live under such grey skies, and this far north. Apparently, the hobs get it as well, and have long done so, yet they thrive well enough. And now they seem to have given it to us. Shortly, many will be sacrificed as a result."

"Why? I thought everything was supposed to be my fault?"

She looked at me in that bitter way she sometimes had. "You mustn't let the grandeur of that building outside fool you."

"I'm sorry. I don't think I can imagine how difficult life is for you."

"No." She was still staring at me. "You probably cannot. But I've almost grown used to that. It's the way you are, and I don't think that's your fault. You see things, but you don't feel them. With you, that's almost an asset. But . . . those early difficulties we had in our marriage—I've learned since that they're not so unusual. And I have a theory of my own. A small one compared to yours, admittedly, but still . . . If we humans were brought up by our parents in the way that most other living creatures are—if we were suckled by them and touched by them, and perhaps

cooed over and tickled as well. If we were allowed to laugh and cry and squirm and perhaps even feel love in the arms of another human instead of the arms of some trained anonymous hob . . . well . . ." Suddenly, she appeared awkward. Her gaze traveled the floor. "I wonder if we might not all be better at being closer. I did tell you it was a small theory. . . ."

I was flustered. I guessed that she was right, but I didn't know how to respond.

"Look at you now," she said, although still without looking up. "Lost for words as soon as I mention human closeness. I suppose you'd call that evidence, wouldn't you?"

With a sweep of her cloak, and a sneeze, she left.

By some process I longed to understand but didn't, Kinbel passed her malaise on to me. I coughed and sneezed for a while and thought it was nothing. Then I started to shiver. I crawled to my bed. The light of unnumbered days came and went at my window as I sweated and ached.

I had some new kind of fever, and that fever brought visions. I believed that I was no longer in my cell. I believed I was flying even higher and faster than my beloved fork-tailed birds. I saw everything. I saw the human cities as they really were—not just the great buildings and squares, but also the desolate sprawls of hob dwellings which surrounded them. I saw the endless ranges of white mountains that seemed to march in every direction from what I now realized was the tiny enclave of our human world. I saw the spreading glaciers, and the plains and savannahs, and the pull and flow of the great God River, and all the teeming life of the great tropic forests, and the storm-flecked grey and blue oceans that stretched even further than the wildest mariner's tale. I saw that our earth is vast, and I saw that time is even vaster, and that change is irrepressible and endless under the blaze of the ever-turning Moon and Sun. I saw, and understood, everything as I tossed and turned in my fevered shroud.

I awoke ringingly clear-headed to the sound of movement. I imagined at first that another quick day was passing and that it was the noise of the shadows dragging themselves about. Then I thought that it was merely my lizard hobs creeping about their usual duties. But the sound didn't fit that pattern, either. These were unmistakably human footsteps, and I felt a small flush of joy to know that Kinbel had returned. But the footsteps were many, and the air and light in my room seemed to be muffled by a presence that I realized could not be hers alone.

I opened my eyes.

Gorgeous in their raiment and retinues, wreathed in incense, fluttering with fans and bells, a horde of priests stood around me, and I knew that the time of my trial had come.

The new halls loomed even grander than I'd imagined as I stumbled across the frosted paving and experienced the odd sensation of being beneath open skies. The rustle and murmur of a huge auditorium quietened as I was drawn inside. Thousands of faces from all the lands of humanity stared in my direction as I was led up and up a winding stairway to the high-podium where I was seated on a kind of caged throne.

The first Moon of the proceedings was taken up in the initial bidding prayers and sacrifices. So was most of the next. Fires had been set in many places to keep the halls warm, and the whinnies of the suffering hobs and the stench of their offal mingled with wafts of undrawn smoke. Meanwhile, I had more than enough opportunity to consider the vast labor and invention that had been poured into the construction of this edifice, and to study the nature and reactions of the many humans who had gathered here: all the priests and the guards and merchants and mariners and other representatives who hoped to be persuaded that I was single-handedly responsible for every woe of the world, and, more importantly, be entertained. Even I shared something like their sense of anticipation; the thrilling idea that justice might be meted out in this world instead of some subsequent one appealed, although I was already certain that the justice would be false.

Kinbel was there, of course. She had a special podium far opposite across the great bowl of the main auditorium. She was not alone there, but sat at the pinnacle of a whole swarm of other priestesses who, according to the current stage of the proceedings, sang or danced or silently mimed their shock or concern. Many eyes other than mine were drawn to her, and the light and the fires and even the smoke conspired to make her presence glow. She seemed less like the woman I remembered than some Goddess made flesh.

Inevitably, for she was never one to miss out on a big social occasion, my mother attended as well. I soon recognized the characteristic pomp of her retinue down amid some of the more expensive balconies, where for every one human there was a swarmingly decorative mass of perhaps a hundred liveried hobs. I sometimes thought I even caught glimpses of something small and withered and possibly human inside all that glory, although I was never sure.

I awaited the words of accusation with interest, yet was amazed at their length and invention when they finally came. I had supposedly done so many things that I felt almost flattered. All those foul desecrations, the terrible deeds, when I'd imagined that the worst that could be thrown at me was an unnecessary love of nature, and of hobs. It went on and on. Despite the glory of the occasion, I began to feel bored, and cold. I started to wish the hours away, and to miss my happy days alone in my cell, and the company of my fork-tailed birds, who had fled again to escape a winter so savage that I wondered if, this time, they would ever return. Even though I studied her endlessly day after day from across the distance of this smoggy, dripping, gilded hall, I missed Kinbel's visits, as well.

Moon by slow Moon, the proceedings continued. The crowds shuffled and whispered, then became noisy with sneezes and coughs as they were possessed by the same malaise that had afflicted Kinbel and myself. People came and went. Some didn't return. This winter city, set beside a frozen river within a great, ice-bound bowl, was cut off from the world, and struggled to cope with the inundation of representatives that my trial had caused. Looking down at all the faces, I studied humans as I had never studied them before. I saw the distinctions in attire and matters of custom that people from different regions affected. And I noticed, as well, the surprising variations in the color of their skin. Although Kinbel's

ebony beauty might be rightly prized, I was struck by how many had a far lighter tint—even paler than my own, and my mother's. I was also struck by how, although the paleness of hob skin is cherished because of the fine contrast it makes with the red of blood, many, even at this high gathering, were surprisingly dark.

My eyes travelled. My mind wandered. High up though I was in my throne of imprisonment, there was a mechanism that seemed capable of raising it higher still. It ascended beyond the dome of the main hall, and long left me puzzled until one evening when I had returned to my cell. Winter was waning, and the Sun lingered over the rim of the mountains long enough for me to be able to gaze across the snowbound city of Dhiol. I saw that on the outside of the main dome of the halls of my trial had been constructed some ultimate spire that rose high above every other spire and tower in the entire city, and that on top of that spire was a platform, and on that platform glinted an extraordinary machine. I'd seen such devices used to punish hobs, but this was far more extravagant. Poised and exquisite as some huge golden insect, the machine of my planned excruciation flashed its many pincers and blades in the last of the evening Sun.

Spring attempted to arrive in Dhiol. Some of the snow and ice melted, and much did not. The priests who traversed with me to and from my cell now chatted freely amongst themselves, and I learned of the frozen bodies of deceased representatives that had been stored in the catacombs. I even heard it said that the great glaciers of the Roof of the World were expanding so mightily that the great tombs and their wrecked contents would soon be pushed into the streets of Dhiol.

Although I'd learned the language of the priests through the scrolls Kinbel had brought me, I'd long reached the point where all the prayer and debate of my trial passed me by. So it came as a surprise when it was suddenly announced that the vote on my verdict would commence the following day, and that I would be given a chance to speak beforehand. My heart gave a small kick. That night, I barely slept.

The priests came with the dawn. I was led through the morning mud to my usual spot high above the vast hall. But today, I was released from my shackles to stand within the cage of my throne, and the crowd I looked down on seemed almost as big and expectant as it had been at the start of my trial. I thanked the Gods for this extraordinary chance.

I'm not sure how clearly I explained things, and there were times when many of my audience seemed lost or confused. After all, they'd come today expecting either a denial or a confession. What they received instead was a different way of understanding the world.

Living creatures, I began, amid gasps that subsided into incredulous silence, are not the work of the Gods. They come about through natural laws. Everything that lives, lives to survive long enough to reproduce, and those that thrive will have more offspring than those that do not. And each living thing is different. Each plant is as different in its own small way as one human is from another; it's just that, as we are not plants, we

are not so good at telling them apart. (At that moment, there was laughter, and I knew that my audience was not yet lost.) But these small differences can be crucial—a fleeter foot, a broader wing, a stronger scent from a blossom—and they can combine and multiply over many generations to form a creature which is no longer the same as its ancestors. As different, indeed, as one type of flower is from another, or all the varied species of fish or bat. (There were murmuring nods at this suggestion; I think I had already taken people further than they realized).

This process of change and development, I told them, is slow but extraordinarily powerful. It explains not only the different plumages of different birds, but why there are birds at all. (A few of the murmurs here sounded hostile, but they were shushed by others who remained interested to hear what else I had to say.) For the earth is almost as old as the Gods themselves (I hadn't intended to put that sop in, but it seemed to help) and it has been changed through frost and fire and inundation and flood. If living things were not able to adapt, nothing would have survived at all.

I paused for a moment there. I felt light-headed and breathless. I'd said much of what I'd wanted to say, yet people were still nodding, and looking up at me as if half-persuaded by what I'd said. Even many of the priests seemed content. Perhaps they'd feared I'd accuse them of all the venery and corruption of which they were most probably guilty, but instead I'd produced this odd lecture. But I could see as I took my breath that some representatives had already lost track of the concept I'd set before them, while others, perhaps the quicker ones, were growing puzzled or restless. A few were even starting to look angry. The noise below me increased. But the designers of these halls had paid great attention to how well an individual voice might carry, and my position in my caged throne was unassailable. Even as people began to scream and block their ears, my words still carried.

It follows, I explained, that all living things must stem from one primitive organism, and life in all its specialization and variety has developed in simple response to the demands of competition and survival through the mechanism of selection and random change. Thus the pig and the boar are related (I glanced over at Kinbel; I even think that she nodded, for I was using her words) and the tree is cousin to the bush. The evidence is written everywhere in the way in which different animals share similar but differently used organs. You can see it in the bones of a leg, the arrangements of a flower. . . .

I think I could have stopped there. In many ways, there was little more to be said. The few in my audience who were able to grasp my theory had already grasped it. As for the rest—they had come to these halls for spectacle and superstition, and still cared for nothing else. So perhaps it was a kind of malice that made me then go on, or it might even have been Kinbel herself. As I looked across at her once more through all the light and fume, I remembered how quickly and elegantly she had grasped my meaning, and seen that it applied not only to trees and fishes and birds.

We humans, I told the gathering, are as much a product of chance and survival as any other species on this earth. Indeed (and now I did have to shout, for the gasps were growing to a roar) the evidence of our origins

abounds in the natural world. Look at the monkeys and the great apes of the jungle. Look, above all, at our closest of relatives—the hob. So closely are we related, in fact, that we can mate and interbreed, just as the horse can with the donkey, and the lion with the tiger, and (and here the uproar grew even wilder) different breeds of dog. Look at the color of your own skin, and the features of your face, and then at the flesh of your retinue. . . .

For some time, I had been aware of activity below me. Now, the last of my proclamation was muffled by an ungainly scuffle as my guardian priests scurried up the final steps and then heavy bodies fell across my own.

It was almost nightfall by the time I was returned to my cell. The Sun glittered on the arms and spindles of the terrible machine on Dhiol's topmost spire, then sank. I, too, slumped down in the gloom. All sense of elation was gone. Then I heard a sound just outside my window; a sound that was at once so strange and yet familiar that I felt an odd displacement of time. I was back in the days before my trial; free to explore my thoughts and the evidence of the scrolls Kinbel brought me—without, it now seemed, a care in the world. But the sound was unmistakable. A few swallows had made their habitual journey to this unwelcoming northern clime. I smiled, although I knew that their chances of raising another batch of chicks in this savage land were probably as doomed as my life was.

I was still sitting and wondering what I had accomplished when the lizard hobs began to come and go about their nightly tasks. This would be their last night. It was hard to imagine that the process of my excruciation would be delayed. As always, I ignored the hobs as they shifted and stirred. Then one of their number came closer that I was accustomed, and removed the hood that had covered its head, and straightened up. I was telling myself that I had never seen a hob so tall, or so fine-looking, or with skin so dark, before I realized who it was.

"They told me I couldn't see you," Kinbel said.

I was so happily astonished that I almost laughed, but her face remained stern.

"You know what will happen tomorrow?" she asked.

"Some kind of judgment will be announced. And then I suppose I will be slowly killed on that machine. . . ." All sense of happiness and surprise drained from me. "I just hope it isn't as awful as I imagine."

"There's something else first. Why else do you think they've made me sit in those halls for all these interminable Moons? You've seen the way the delegates stare at me, and how my fellow priests chant and respond. I'm your wife, and they still want to hear about all the terrible things you did to me . . . Things . . ." She made a gesture. "Even worse than they can imagine, although I can't believe that that amounts to very much."

"If you're called to denounce me and make up stories, Kinbel, then you should do so."

"Even if that means I have to lie?"

"Things are so bad for me now, there's little you can do to make them worse."

"But it wouldn't be true. And I'm standing witness before our—or at least *my*—Gods."

"You don't still accept all that nonsense?"

"If you mean that the Sun will stop in his movement across the skies if the ziggurats of Thris do not run red each day with fresh hob blood—no, I do not. I think the Gods are far less eager for hob slaughter than most of the priestly spheres imagine. I'm tired of its stench. Even as a child, I used to hate the way my father would come home each evening with his vestments stained—like, I would say, a butcher's apron, although no self-respecting human butcher ever gets that close to the work his hobs do for him. I'm sick of slaughter. But, yes, I do still believe that there is more to this world than what we experience with our senses. That life's not just the product of struggle and vicious chance—"

"That's never what I meant."

"Perhaps it isn't. But this is hardly the time to debate niceties. I've watched over you these long Moons. I've listened to you. I sometimes think I could almost say I've known you, and that I've seen you for what you are, which is a good man. I'm a priestess and I know what that machine out there will do to you, and I don't believe you've done anything to deserve such agonies, nor that it's what the Gods would want of us—if, that is, the Gods want anything at all. Perhaps this world is being ruined by a coming age of ice, and perhaps we all are being punished, but if there has to be a sacrifice, let it not be you. Let it be someone else. Now . . ."

Kinbel unbundled something from around her waist. It was a grey livery much like the hobs were wearing, and her own.

" . . . put this on."

"How did you manage all of this? How did you persuade—"

She gave a laugh; the sound was half-happy, half-sad. "Even now, you have nothing but questions! You can't accept anything without trying to have it explained. . . . I think, may the Gods help me, that's what I most hate and admire about you, you wilful, stupid man. But, since you ask, do you seriously imagine that you're the only human who has ever taken an interest in the welfare of hobs? And, in all your schemes and thoughts, did it never occur to you to find a way of communicating with these creatures who have cared for you for so long and so kindly in this cell?"

Kinbel was surrounded by them now. The mute grey creatures shifted about her in the dim light like shadows thrown from the edges of her robe. Their movement reminded me of the priestesses who had surrounded Kinbel during my trial, but the sense of true reverence and worship was much more strong.

"If you'd only taken the time," she said, "to learn to communicate with your hobs about something other than ditches and crops, you might have learned far more. Every living creature has its own story, and my friends here have been through such times and sufferings as you would not believe, even were you to ascend into that terrible machine tomorrow. All you ever had to do was to reach out with an open heart . . ."

I watched as her fine dark fingers traced shapes in the pale flowers of the hobs' open palms, and then how the fingers of the hobs dipped into hers. It was a dance of touch and shade, a mingling of different lives, and the strange thought came upon me that perhaps Kinbel was right—perhaps there was more to this world than could ever be proved by clever

minds like my own. Then, at some signal from her that I did not see or understand, the hobs drew back.

"We all must go," she muttered.

"What about the watchers? What about the human guards?"

"You forget how used they are to having everything done for them. The people who guard this tower are as lazy as . . ." She paused. The phrase was *as lazy as a hob*. "As lazy as humans. Quick." Her hand moved to her neck. A key dangled on a piece of string. "We have to leave."

Through corridors and beneath arches. The hobs led. Kinbel and I followed. I stooped and scurried. I was a hob myself, a shadow, but weaker, and clumsier, and lost. It was night, and pitch dark, yet I sensed that we passed through places with which I had once been familiar, back in the days of my youth—those far corners of my lost homestead, where every new turn and experience had been a lesson and a surprise. Great subterranean halls filled with the lost lumber of other ages and styles. Vast, vaulted kitchens echoing to footsteps amid the dangling metal of thousands of hooked pans. White ghosts of laundry rooms. Reeking lakes of wine and beer. Potting sheds, even, filled with the extra dark of waiting earth. We seemed to pass through all of these places, but now they were chill and empty and distant as they waited for a summer that would never come.

The journey seemed even more endless than the darkness. I was bruised and tired and exhausted, but part of me was elated. It was as if the prayers that I'd never offered had been answered in the shape of these quiet and subtle creatures, and of Kinbel. We were, I reasoned, moving through these halls and passages not only beyond the chapels of the priesthood that had imprisoned me, but the entire city of Dhiol. Sometimes, I thought I caught voices, or glimmers of light shed along the cold, wet passageways. I was certain that I smelled human effluent, and worse. But we pushed on without pause. After all, what human would ever think to notice the passage of a few anemic hobs?

Then we reached a final opening in which the darkness changed texture, and the breath of a cold night came rushing to touch my face. The archway was set in a hillside beyond the confines of the city, and my exploring hands as I levered myself out to stand on the cold earth told me that, like almost everything that is hob-made in our world, it was cleverly and finely wrought.

The hobs gathered around me, touching hands with Kinbel, yet avoiding my own. Some kind of message seemed to be passed between them as we stood beneath a thin Moon and a few cloud-chased stars. I sensed a change in their posture. They even seemed to glance toward me with their ravaged eye sockets for a moment before they turned back toward Kinbel.

"From here," she said, "you and they have a chance of being free."

My teeth were starting to chatter. Iron air was pressing down from the dark shoulders of the Roof of the World. It took me a moment to understand.

"What do you mean? 'You and they'?"

"I have to go back to Dhiol. Look, the Sun will soon be rising. If I beat on

those gates down there for long enough, I'm sure I'll manage to wake someone, be it human or hob."

"Kinbel, you can't!" My head was rushing. I felt as the priests claim to feel when they feel the spirit of the Moon within them, or the turn of the stars.

"If I go back, I'll be able to answer for myself in those halls. I'll have my chance to speak what I see as the truth just as you did yesterday. I'm a priestess. I still owe that much to the Gods."

"Don't you realize what they'll—"

She stopped me by taking my hand. "You realized, and yet you did what seemed right. You've got to give me that same chance."

"I just said what I thought. I could even be wrong. Especially what I said about humans and hobs—our mixed offspring and characteristics, the idea that we interbreed. That's just supposition. I have no proper evidence. What it needs is more study. What I have to do is—"

Kinbel stopped me by leaning forward and pressing her fingers to my lips. "There. Human touch. That's the only way I've ever found of shutting you up. But look, the Sun is rising. I have to go."

"You can't..."

"You've said that already. I must."

She stepped back, and briefly touched the ravaged faces of each of the hobs, which shone with edges of fire in the first flush of the rising Sun. Dhiol stretched below us, ashy shadow in a valley lit as yet only by the glittering ember of its highest tower. She turned and walked down the slope toward the city walls. And as I watched her go and did nothing to stop her, I knew that everything that had been said about me in the long days of my trial was true.

I'm a monster.

An aberration.

I'm less than human, and far less than hob.

Of all the things that I've described to you, reader, it seems strangest of all to have written of the old seasons: of hot summers, migrating birds, budding flowers, and misty autumns. Not that the weather doesn't change up here in these mountains, but we treasure the cold hard darkness of winter, and see spring as the harshest of times, fraught with avalanches, rockslides, and dangerous torrents of meltwater, instead of as the most blessed. I say *Blessed*—as if blessings really existed! But, more and more, I find myself thinking in these ridiculous priestly terms. I smile up at the cold white Sun, ask questions of the wind or the Moon.

My mind must be weakening, or I'm getting old. Otherwise, why am I wasting my precious supply of papyrus and ink on writing this tale? I would once have filled these same scrolls with notes, descriptions, questions, calculations, theories. But the truth is that the part of my mind that once worked in that way—as hard as a well-whipped hob, as the saying used to go—feels worn out. And time is no longer precious to me. I have plenty of it. My colleagues or captors have little use for me. I sometimes feel that I have little use for myself. But it's pleasant to recall those old times—or many of them. And I enjoy the process of writing, even if, in doing so, I feel that very little has been explained, even to myself.

I still think of Kinbel's actions. And I still have no idea whether things happened as she intended. For, although she showed every evidence of knowledge, I cannot believe that she would have submitted to events had she really known what was to come. But even *I* knew, and I did nothing—I watched her walk down that hillside toward her city, and her fate. Around this point my suffering mind still revolves.

The climb away from Dhiol on that cold spring morning was hard: for me, who had been too long at leisure in my cell—and for my mute and blind companions, who found themselves suddenly evicted into a place of wild, high air and jagged drops. But I could see, and they could feel and climb, and between us we made our way higher and higher across a maze of icy rock. We were all soon exhausted, and bleeding, but, hand over hand, and arm over arm, flesh against flesh, we still hauled ourselves up.

It was a bright, clear day. By noon, with no bay of hounds, shout of humans or grunt of hobs to signal pursuit, we took time to breathe. I looked down. Dome upon dome, tower upon tower, Dhiol was a perfect jewel. The river's ice-flecked rush was like a curl of shining hair. I had never been a lover of cities, but the place seemed beautiful to me now that I knew I could never return to it.

Perhaps I had allowed myself to briefly forget about Kinbel—monster, aberration, that I am. But even as I gazed down at it, the city breathed out a great and glittering clamor, a rush of trumpet and voices, a seethe of processions and flags. Then the noonday Sun blazed in an incredible beam through parting strands of clouds as if the Gods really were at work, and that beam found focus on hilo's dreadful topmost spire that rose above the halls of my trial. The air that I gazed across seemed to shudder, and my blind companions gathered and trembled and touched hands. I felt as if I could see everything—as if I, too, were a God—and that which I could not see, I could feel, and that which I could not feel, I heard. It was, above all, the sounds of Kinbel's screams that filled that great space through all the long and terrible afternoon. I hear them still. After all the labor and expense that had gone into constructing it, I imagine that the priests decided that their machine must be used. And if not on me, what better choice than my consort—the one who had engineered my escape and who, even in the terror of her excruciation, still refused to denounce me? Sometimes in my musings, I can briefly make it seem as if Kinbel's return to Dhiol and her prolonged death were inevitable. But I still like to pride myself on the rigor of my intellect, and I know that I could have taken Kinbel's fate from her, and that agonized death was something that I was certainly worthy of, just as certainly as she was not.

But I still cannot leave those events alone. They gnash their blades as if some machine of excruciation has formed itself inside my head. I wonder, for example, at the ease of my escape. After such time and investment, and on that of all nights, were the priests really so neglectful? Perhaps they saw the truth as clearly as I did, and knew that I bore no more responsibility for the worsening seasons than did the swallows, and that my death would cause nothing to change. Yet rash promises had been made about the many miracles the Gods would grant upon my death. The ice would retreat, the warm days return, the crops grow, the God River

herself would flow with beneficent calm again. And, as they began to consider the consequences of all those unfulfilled promises, perhaps it occurred to them that it might be better and easier to let me escape, and uselessly sacrifice a scapegoat instead?

Ideas, theories—you see how I still cannot let them go. But life continues, and I, to my shame and disappointment, find small satisfactions—even hints of something resembling happiness—in observing the habits of the increasing numbers of hobs who have come to reside here in the Roof of the World. The ice tombs, ravaged though they are, provide a ready source of materials—even of food, for the frozen produce of lost offerings can, if properly heated and cooked, provide useful nourishment. Then there are all the stones, and the tools, and the furnishings. Hobs, despite all the sayings, are industrious, and they know how things work in a way no human has ever done. But rarely is anything put to the use for which it was originally intended. A funeral bed makes shelter for an entire tribe. A sarcophagus becomes a trough to feed the animals they so cleverly manage to raise here—once its previous occupant has been evicted, I might add. These changed ruins seem like some dream of the human world in which everything is twisted and transformed.

As well as being industrious, the hobs are intelligent. They understand that these funerary supplies will only last for a few years. And after that, I believe they will survive just as well. Already, parties go out to hunt for boar, goat, and deer, and to collect the berries that still grow in what passes for summer. Sometimes, they even risk venturing into the lower lands around Dhiol, which are now mostly empty of civilized life, either human or hob. Hobs are used to hard times, and to difficult work. Above all, though, I believe that they will prosper because this cold land belongs far more to them than it ever did to us humans.

In the times when I permit myself to think in terms of my old theories, I feel an understanding of how humans and hobs came to live as we have done. Just as in the priestly myths, we humans, with our dark flesh, thinner limbs and intolerance of cold, came from the warm south. We spread slowly north in the time when the ice sheets were in retreat as the world grew warm; moving across and around the Bounded Ocean, toward the lands where my family eventually prospered on the trade of the Great North Water. There, we encountered our near relatives who, with their thicker-framed bodies and lighter skins, coped more easily with a colder Sun. We called these strange, half-familiar creatures—with their red hair, thick jaws and beetle brows, who signed and grunted instead of speaking, and wore half-rotted furs for clothing—hobs.

Perhaps there were times of co-operation and understanding. More likely, there was fear and distrust. Almost certainly, there would have been conflict as our numbers increased and resources grew more precious. But we humans won, and the hobs were subjugated, and we began to use and exploit them as they are used and exploited still. As to why it was that way around, and not some other, I cannot tell. Life, as I still see it, is ruled as much by chance as any other process. Perhaps there is some other version of our world where the hobs triumphed, and we humans

worked for aeons to build hob cities. There may even be a world where, in a spate of even greater vindictiveness, we humans destroyed the hobs entirely, and their existence passed into records in the rocks in the way of many other lost creatures. But if that had happened, if the hobs vanished and we humans came to thrive alone, I struggle to imagine a better world than the one that I have known. Hard work would still have to be done, and I doubt if its burdens would have been shared equally. I shudder, indeed, to think of the means we would have used to divide humanity between the rulers and the ruled, the watchers and the workers, the fat and the poor, were it not for the convenient presence of hobs. It may have been something as ridiculous as skin color, or the simple accidents of geography and birth.

The hobs in this high retreat treat me mostly with distance, and a kind of respect. Sometimes, admittedly, there are small abuses and bullyings—they are as aware as the humans in my trial of the accusation of my being a hob lover, and seem to regard the idea with almost equal disgust. But they find me food, and supplies such as this papyrus. They even let me forage on my own, secure in the knowledge that I would die if I wandered off too far in this jagged place of bitter cold. Mostly, though, I keep to my cave, which was once the anteroom of a large tomb. In many ways, it isn't so different from my cell in Dhiol.

It suits them, I think, to have me as their willing captive almost as well as it once suited the priests of the Moon. Word sometimes reaches us from the hobs who flee here of human doings in the lowlands, and it seems my name has become an even bigger curse. I'm responsible now not just for the changing climate, but for the wars that have set human against human as the shortages increase. Of course, when I say human against human, I still mostly mean hob against hob, but the numbers of hobs who will unquestioningly do human bidding is decreasing, even if they are still in the millions. Our world is changing in more ways than simply by growing cold.

The other name of which I still hear, as if it didn't torment me enough already, is Kinbel's. The hobs revere her for reasons that I find too complex to fully understand. They say, for example, that through her suffering no further sacrifice will ever be necessary, although I'm certain that plenty of hob sacrifice still goes on. Odder still, it's even signed in whispers that there are some humans who revere her as well. Could it be that Kinbel's death really wasn't in vain? Is it possible that what she did might somehow signal through history that hob and human can live together, not as slave and master, but as equals?

Again, my mind rambles, but I'm almost sure that humanity would have prospered better if we'd had to do things for ourselves. Maybe our temples wouldn't have been quite so huge or our gardens so elaborate, but we might have been pushed instead toward inventions that allowed more to be done with less effort. I remember the times when I was alone in my homestead with that broken leg, and how the hobs bore me about with the contortion known as the hob carpet, when it seemed as if I was walking unaided even though I was supported almost entirely by their

work. That, it seems to me now, is how all of humanity has lived for far too many centuries. We imagine that we do it all ourselves, when in fact we do nothing.

My hands are turning numb. Soon, I will find a place in the ice to consign these scrolls in the vain hope that they will be found and read. Are you there, reader? Are you human, or hob? Are you even from this particular world? Or perhaps you're from some other place, where humans worked so hard and alone that they heated the very air so warmly that they stopped the glaciers from their terrible return. Nothing but fantasies. This real world fades. My teeth chatter. My bones hurt. I sense the coming of another fever. Perhaps my final excruciation does not lie so very far off.

But the seasons still change, and life will go on. And sometimes things will be good, and sometimes they will be terrible, and most often they will be both at once with much that is neither intermingled. The hobs who come to our redoubt all bear their scars and stories of the horrors of the lowlands. Sometimes they arrive with other burdens as well. There is a young hob who reached here two dozen Moons ago. She was female and pretty (there, I've said it), if exhausted by her long flight. And she was noticeably pregnant.

I watched her with the same distant curiosity with which I watch most things as her belly grew and her term approached. One night, and not so very far from my cave, I heard the unmistakable commotion of a birth. The hobs were too preoccupied to notice my presence as I watched. A baby was held up, mewling and screaming, still dripping from its caul. Then came a second, which is as unusual with hobs as it is with humans. I thought at first that the even greater uproar that ensued was simply down to that. But the two babies were very different. The first one was pale-skinned, and already had a fetching crest of red hair. The second was thinner, and longer. Its skin was dark.

The debate that transpired was too quick for me to follow, but the result was plain. Even as the new mother nursed the child with the crest of red hair, the darker, more human-seeming baby was taken out along the smoky lamplit tunnels toward the snow-teeming night. Hobs, as I've long since discovered, may not practice ritual sacrifice or eat their young, but they are not afraid of bringing death. I ran after them. I signed. I yelled.

Maybe I've saved or helped other creatures during my human existence, but I cannot honestly recall when, or how. Abstract theories and good husbandry are fine enough things in their way, but I've long grown sick of intellectual pride along with all other kinds of pomp. Through what I'm still convinced was my intervention, the dark-skinned child was allowed to survive. She's in her thirteenth Moon now, and is learning to sign, and to walk. Perhaps because of my special interest, she's less afraid of me than most of the other young hobs are. Her mother sometimes even lets her squat in my cave, and I try talking to her using human words, and she gargles some of them back in return. She's a sweet thing, precious beyond jewels, and has a hob name which I cannot record with these written symbols, but I call her Kinbel, and I've noticed that a few of the hobs have started signing to her by their own version of that name, as well. O

THE DRAGONS OF BABEL

By Michael Swanwick

Tor, \$25.95 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-7653-1950-0

Swanwick's new novel takes place in the world of his *Iron Dragon's Daughter*, where magic and technology interact in what one might as well call a Swanwickian manner. I don't know if anyone's used the word as an adjective before, but I think it's about time we broke it out and put it to work.

The story begins in a backwoods village, a hick town that has all the trappings of a farm community in a fantasy world—the kind of place heroes are supposed to come from. But Swanwick throws the reader a twist almost at the beginning—the town is part of a country caught up in a high-tech war, except that the tech here is a kind of magic, with iron dragons playing the role of bombers. When one crash-lands near the village, the protagonist, Will, finds his whole life changing.

The dragon, damaged but still dangerous, moves into the village and begins to control its inhabitants. It decides to make Will its agent for controlling the others. Horrified at the demands of the role, the boy eventually escapes and goes on a long journey that brings him to the capital city, Babylonia. Along the way, he becomes the guardian of a girl—at least, that is what she looks like—named Esme. He also becomes the protégé of a con artist named Nat Whilk, who introduces him into the ways of the city.

Will's career in the city takes up much of the course of the book, and Swanwick has built his city from a wildly heterogeneous set of materials. The city is a hodgepodge of ancient and modern, with allusions to dozens of mythologies, from Sumerian to Rastafarian—appropriate to a city that is synonymous with the fragmentation of the human race into all the different languages and cultures of the world. Will begins his career as a rebel, literally in the underground, hunted by the powers that be. He graduates, under Nat's tutelage, into a political hireling, doing dirty jobs for a series of officials.

Esme, who comes and goes in Will's life, turns out to be someone who has gotten the gift of eternal youth at the cost of forgetting everything almost immediately. Her greatest talent is the ability to find someone to take care of her, whatever situation she finds herself in. But it seems to be Will's fate to have her constantly turning up in his life, just as he has moved to a new phase of it. Not quite his daughter, Esme remains one of the few people whom Will can call family.

Swanwick leads Will through a series of adventures culminating in his rise to the pinnacle of Babylonian society, encountering new layers of danger at every step. As always in Swanwick's stories, the journey is full of the unexpected, much of it wryly allusive to a whole spectrum of myth and legend—including, for example, a cameo appearance of Ellen Kushner's swordmaster St.

Vere to deliver a wonderfully cynical observation on the society Will is trying to become part of.

Witty, constantly inventive, written with enormous flair, this is one of Swanwick's most complex and rewarding novels.

END OF THE WORLD BLUES

By Jon Courtenay Grimwood

Bantam Spectra, \$12.00 (tp)

ISBN: 978-0-553-58996-2

A near-future thriller with a strong fantastic element, set partly in Japan, partly in England. The story has two protagonists, one an expat Englishman who isn't entirely at home in either country, and a homeless girl whose apparent Japanese-ness turns out to be a cover for something much more esoteric.

The story begins in Tokyo; Kit Nouveau, owner of an Irish bar whose clientele consists largely of outlaw bikers, encounters Lady Neku, a teenage runaway who apparently lives on the fringes of society—yet somehow has come into the possession of large sums of money. Kit is living on the edge himself, carrying on an affair with the wife of a rich Japanese businessman, a woman to whom he is supposedly giving English lessons.

The trouble begins when Kit, on his way home from a tryst, is robbed at gunpoint, then unexpectedly saved by Neku, who almost without any effort disarms and kills the gunman. By the time Kit sorts out this event, he is late getting home, and his wife Yoshi, a renowned pottery artist, has been stuck taking care of the bar instead of going for an overnight visit to her sister. They argue; he goes outside in the night, and behind him the building explodes into flames. It burns to the ground, killing his wife.

Kit's problems are just beginning.

It turns out that, under Japanese law, the two were never married, his Japanese wife not having registered the marriage, which took place abroad. He therefore doesn't own the property on which the bar stood, which is suddenly prime territory for development. He is also a prime suspect in the burning of the bar, which the police are treating as arson—and possibly murder.

Meanwhile, we are beginning to get a glimpse of who Lady Neku really is in the world from which she comes—a strange castle that keeps changing shape in an off-world habitat called Nawa-No-Ukiyo or Floating Rope World. Here, she is part of a rich and powerful family, which has arranged her marriage to the son of a rival clan. Grimwood feeds the reader pieces of her story, gradually creating an image of the life from which she is escaping by coming to our world—and a hint of why she might want to.

Freed by the police, Kit encounters a figure from his past, Kate O'Mally—mother of an old lover—who convinces him to return to England to investigate her daughter's disappearance, which the officials have apparently ruled a suicide, although there is no body. He agrees, leaving a group of his biker friends to guard the site of the bar. The would-be developers are still trying to chase former bar denizens off with force. But instead of a return to a safer, more familiar place, Kit finds himself in another deadly game—and finds that Lady Neku has somehow come to England, and means to take a role in his future, whether he likes it or not.

Writing in a compulsively readable style, Grimwood propels his characters into the midst of strangeness and danger. Whether in the unfamiliar world of Nawa-No-Ukiyo,

the somewhat more familiar one of modern Japan, or the superficially familiar London, Grimwood knows how to catch the reader off guard with the unexpected detail. At the same time, he knows how to ground his most exotic scenes in reality with a homely touch. And he has a very good ear for dialogue in several quite exotic flavors.

Grimwood doesn't really qualify as a new writer—this is his fifth book for Spectra, and he has several with other publishers—but he is definitely one to watch. You might want to look for some of the others—for example the “Arabesk” trilogy, also from Spectra—when you get your copy of *End of the World Blues*. This stuff is likely to be habit-forming, and it'd be a shame to finish one and have nothing else to follow it with.

PUSHING ICE

By Alastair Reynolds

Ace, \$25.95 (hc)

ISBN: 0-441-01401-1

Pushing Ice is Reynolds's latest twist on his patented brand of modern space opera. This one begins in the relatively near future in our own solar system. By the time it's done, the story has worked its way into a distant future where much of the galaxy is occupied and something like a human empire has come into being.

A prologue in the far future sets the scene; a galaxy-wide senate passes a resolution to honor a historic figure known as the Benefactor, a woman named Bella Lind. The body of the story then jumps to 2057, aboard an asteroid-mining ship, *Rockhopper*, commanded by Bella Lind herself. The action begins when Lind asks her crew if they can be ready to move the ship to a new destination on short notice. It turns out

that Janus, one of Saturn's moons, has broken out of its orbit and begun to leave the solar system. *Rockhopper* is the only ship in position to intercept it. Promised high bonus pay, the crew votes to accept the mission.

And then the problems begin to pile up. Partway to the intercept point, one of the crew is badly wounded in a freak accident. There is no way to save him—except to use a brand new technology that essentially kills him so that doctors can repair the damage and revive him. Another crew member, terminally ill with cancer, might be saved if he can get to doctors in time, but the ship's new course requires too much time. Lind has one daunting moral choice after another thrown at her, and each time she must alienate part of the crew, many of whom argue for aborting the mission before they reach Janus.

The chief of Lind's EVA crew is Svetlana Barseghian, a tough woman who begins to question Lind's decisions. Finally convinced that Lind is being lied to by the corporation that owns the ship, she takes over command in a bloody coup. But by then the ship has landed on Janus, which has accelerated even more radically and is obviously on its way out of the solar system to an anomalous structure in deep space. *Rockhopper* has gone too far to turn back; their only choice is to ride it out. Meanwhile, Lind lives in exile in a solitary module, far from the colony that clusters around the mostly abandoned ship. And as the ice that covered its surface begins to fall away, Janus has revealed itself as a gigantic machine of unknown origin and purpose.

As the story unfolds, *Rockhopper* and its crew find themselves in increasingly expanding vistas. Advanced aliens arrive, bringing the disturbing news of an entire larger

conflict beyond the crew's struggle to survive. As the climax nears, *Rockhopper's* crew breaks out into a universe even larger than anything the characters imagined. This is the kind of sudden expansion of scale that one finds in the best of Clarke's work, to choose an obvious predecessor.

At the same time as the story is approaching apocalyptic dimensions, Reynolds keeps his plot rooted in the hard-bitten personal conflicts that set it in motion. Lind and Barseghian each remain true to their principles, each strong enough to compel admiration even as the reader sees their flaws. The conclusion, which involves several reversals of fortune, is strengthened by the fact that, even with the miraculous powers of a superior alien race available to them, the characters prevail because of their own human qualities.

Modern space opera with a huge scope, a strong scientific backbone, and plenty of heart. Read it.

THE SPIRAL LABYRINTH

By Matthew Hughes

Night Shade, \$24.95 (hc)

ISBN: 978-1-59780-091-4

This is the latest in a series featuring detective Hengis Hapthorn, perhaps most succinctly described as "Sherlock Holmes in the Dying Earth."

Hapthorn is an inhabitant of a high-tech world, but his mind has been invaded by a denizen of a more primitive world, where magic is triumphant. His alter ego, Osk Rievor, excels as much in untrammelled intuition as Hapthorn does in logical thought. Neither of the two is entirely happy with this arrangement, since each has separate interests. In particular, Rievor wants Hapthorn to delay accepting an assignment that will take him into space, since

Rievor wishes to investigate certain possibly magical phenomena that have come to his attention.

Rievor identifies a spot where several "lines of power" evidently come together, and asks Hapthorn to take him there. Hapthorn, intent on his space trip, insists on postponing the investigation. But the space voyage turns out to be a trap set by a mad ship's control system, which the two (aided by Hapthorn's formerly robotic assistant, now transformed into a grinnet, a creature that combines characteristics of cat and ape) finally manage to evade and return home.

After this odd (and seemingly disjoint) episode, Hapthorn agrees to go to the junction of the power lines, where he leaves the ship to investigate the odd landscape. Suddenly he finds himself propelled into a world where none of his technology is available—here, only magic works! Rievor is now in his element. Unfortunately, Hapthorn is well out of his, a problem compounded when the two of them are separated. With Rievor gone from his mind—whereabouts unknown, at least for a time—Hapthorn must make his way forward with only the grinnet, which is by turns a complete annoyance and an indispensable aid.

This begins a series of droll adventures in which Hapthorn encounters various bandits, mages, supernatural beings, and other creatures who fail to fit into his rational world picture. There are several plot twists that border on the outrageous, jumping through a series of settings that at first glance might seem utterly incompatible. Through it all, Hapthorn hovers somewhere between brilliant and clueless—a sure recipe for amusement.

Hughes somehow catches the trick of combining dry understatement

with a colorful, almost baroque, vocabulary that characterizes much of Jack Vance's best writing. If you enjoy the latter as much as I do, this series by Hughes may well be just your cup of tea.

DIFFERENT ENGINES: How Science Drives Fiction and Fiction Drives Science
By Mark Brake & Rev. Neil Hook
 Macmillan Palgrave, \$24.95 (hc)
 ISBN: 978-0-230-01980-5

This is a provocative short history of SF, from precursors to modern times, by two Welsh academics. Its particular slant, on the interplay between SF ideas and scientific discovery, is what makes this one different from the usual academic fare.

The authors begin in the renaissance, probably the earliest point in history at which it makes sense to describe any kind of story as *science* fiction. Previous voyages to strange worlds and encounters with odd beings may have been perfectly credible to their readers, and perhaps even to their authors, but it is only with the arrival of the systematic investigation of the natural world that a writer could borrow the authority of what we now recognize as science to support his creations.

Interestingly enough, several of those renaissance scientists were quite at home with speculative fictions, beginning with Johannes Kepler himself. *Somnium (The Dream)*, Kepler's 1623 story of a lunar voyage, begins a line of scientifically informed fictions. True, Kepler's travelers get to the moon with the aid of spirits; but what they find there is based on the cutting-edge astronomical theories of Copernicus and the latest observations of Galileo.

The authors follow the genre through several eras of science, each

given a neat label and characterized by a certain approach to fiction and science. While much of the material will be familiar to anyone who's investigated the history of the field, their take on some of the material shows it in an unexpected light. In particular, they reject some of the orthodoxies American historians of SF have been prone to. The "Astounding Age," as they refer to the period between H.G. Wells and World War II, spends little time with the U.S. pulp writers who were the bread and butter of First Fandom. Instead, the focus is largely on European writers and filmmakers, with an emphasis on the Soviet and German pioneers of rocketry. Interesting stuff, about which many U.S. readers don't know a lot.

But the writers' omissions are also telling. A number of important authors are conspicuous by their absence. This is particularly evident in the chapter "The Atomic Age," which deals with the era from World War II to the 1960s, characterized by atomic standoff and cold war paranoia. The authors concentrate on George Orwell's *1984*, Walter Miller's *Canticle for Leibowitz*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, and George Stewart's *Earth Abides*, along with two films, "On the Beach" and "Dr. Strange-love."

Granted, all are first rate. Granted, Miller and Stewart deserve wider recognition outside the field. But the authors' picture of the state of SF in this era is decidedly flawed without some mention of Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke, Heinlein, or Pohl—just to mention the first names that pop into my head. Not a word about them—although, to be honest, they are mentioned in other parts of the book. Heinlein even serves as the lead figure in the next chapter, which

discusses *Stranger in a Strange Land*—a book that many readers consider a departure from the kind of work that made him important. On that point, I would side with the authors, who treat it as a major catalyst of the era that followed. Still, it seems a distinct oversight not to recognize his work of the forties and fifties.

The best way to come to grips with the book is to see it not as a history of SF in the usual sense, but as a history of ideas, predominantly scientific ideas. The authors use SF to illustrate the way those ideas entered into the imagination of writers, some of whom did things with them that ended up influencing the thinking of scientists. From the SF reader's point of view, the book omits or distorts a fair chunk of our history. It also tends to blur lines of influence, often acting as if people were aware of developments that didn't

occur until some years later; not impossible, of course, but a bit disconcerting.

On the other hand, the writers' seriousness about the ideas behind SF and their unerring taste in picking some of the best work of the last half century to illustrate those ideas is worthy of high praise. They take it for granted that SF is important, and that its best authors are well informed about the scientific and intellectual movements of their times. Their exposition of some of the science behind SF is sometimes a bit perfunctory, but they do make a serious effort to show the connections. And, like much of the greatest SF, the book is an excellent starting point for passionate arguments on fascinating subjects.

Flawed, unreliable, biased—and in spite of all, well worth a look for anyone who cares about SF. ○

TIME TRAVEL TIME

Time ship away
A day a day
And soon it'll need a new master.
The crew won't last
To get to the past
If their time per time isn't faster.

—Ruth Berman

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Memorial Day is the biggest convention weekend of the year for SF and fantasy fans. Attend one near you. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

APRIL 2008

11-13—WillyCon. For info, write: c/o Ron Vick, c/o WSC, 1111 Main, Wayne NE 68787. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) willycon.com. (E-mail) scifict@wsc.edu. Con will be held in: Wayne NE (if city omitted, same as in address) on the campus of Wayne State University. Guests will include: none announced at press.

18-20—EerieCon. eeriecon.org. eeriecon@juno.com. Days Inn, Niagara Falls NY. Joe Haldeman, Saphira Giron.

18-20—PenguinCon. penguincon.org. Troy MI. Open-source software and SF.

18-20—OLNFC, 22 Purefoy Rd., Coventry CV3 5GL, UK. theofficialleonardnimoyfanclub.org. Learnington Spa, UK.

24-27—Nebula Awards. sfwa.org. Driskill Hotel, Austin TX. SF and Fantasy Writers of America annual get-together.

25-27—RavenCon, 9623 Hollyburgh Terr., Charlotte NC 28215. ravencon.com. Richmond VA. Hickman, Strauss (mel).

25-27—Malice Domestic, Box 8007, Gaithersburg MD 20898. (301) 730-1675. Crystal Marriott, Arlington VA. Mysteries.

25-28—CostumeCon, 1875 S. Bascom Ave., #116-276, Campbell CA 95008. cc26.info. San Jose CA. Costume fans.

MAY 2008

2-4—DemiCon, Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50323. demicon.org. Hotel Ft. Des moines. S. Barnes, Bentley, T. Tomomatsu.

9-11—LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890. leprecon.org. Francisco Grande, Casa Grande AZ.

16-18—KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6. keycon.org. Radisson. Flint, Yolen, Mattingly, Wilkes, Luke Ski.

16-18—MobiCon. mobicon.org. Best Western Ashbury, Mobile AL. R. Picardo, Jim Butcher, Larry Elmore, P. Burns.

16-19—EatonCon, c/o Slusser, UCR, Riverside CA 92517. (951) 827-3233. eaton-collection.ucr.edu. Academic.

23-25—MarCon, Box 141414, Columbus OH 43214. marcon.org. Hyatt. Weisskopf, Van Tilburg, Brust, Sola, Standlee.

23-25—Oasis, Box 592905, Orlando FL 32859. oasfis.org. Sheraton Downtown. D. Gerrold, P. Vincenti, the Suttons.

23-25—FanlmeCon, Box 8068, San Jose CA 95155. fanlme.com. help@fanlme.com. Convention Center. For anime fans.

23-25—Anime North, Box 24090, Toronto ON M6H 4H6. animenorth.com. For anime fans.

23-25—Animazement, Box 1383, Cary NC 27512. (919) 941-5050. animazement.org. Sheraton, Durham NC. Anime.

23-26—BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. (410) 563-3727. balticon.org. Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD.

23-26—BayCon, Box 610427, San Jose CA 95161. baycon.org. Hyatt and Convention Center, Santa Clara CA.

23-26—ConQuest, Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64171. kcsfsciencefiction.org. Airport Hilton. General SF/fantasy con.

23-26—WisCon, c/o SF3, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. wiscon.info. Concourse Hotel. McHugh, Duchamp. Feminism/SF.

23-26—MediaWestCon, 200 E. Thomas, Lansing MI 48906. mediawestcon.org. mediawestcon@aol.com. Holiday Inn S.

23-26—MisCon, Box 7721, Missoula MT 59807. (406) 544-7093. miscon.org. Ruby's Inn. General SF & fantasy con.

23-26—TimeGate. timegatecon.org. Holiday Inn Chamblee/Dunwoody Rd., Atlanta GA. Doctor Who and Stargate.

30-June 1—ConCarolinas, Box 9100, Charlotte NC 28299. concarolinas.org. Mike Resnick, Kim Harrison, F. Hunter.

AUGUST 2008

6-10—Dervention 3, Box 1349, Denver CO 80201. dervention3.org. Bujold, Stembach, Whitmore. WorldCon. \$200.

AUGUST 2009

6-10—Anticipation, CP 105, Montreal QC H4A 3P4. anticipationsf.ca. Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US\$150+.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Alaska Writers Guild call for entries for Ralph Williams Memorial Short Story Contest. Grand prize: \$5,000, division prizes of \$1,000, to be presented at 2008 Speculative Fiction Writers Conference, Anchorage, October 1-5, 2008. Two written critiques provided for each entry. Contest deadline: April 15, 2008. For guidelines and application, visit www.alaskawritersguild.com, or write to: 9138 Arlon Street, Suite A-3, Box 910, Anchorage AK 99507

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NEXT ISSUE

JULY ISSUE

Our lead story for July continues **Brian Stableford's** occasional series following the outrageous exploits of several famed Elizabethan personalities during humanity's introduction to the alien (not to mention strange) Universe. In the latest installment, we leave the humid nightmares of "Doctor Muffet's Island" behind, and, returning to England, find alchemist and charlatan Thomas Kelley in a peculiar position when his usual fraudery becomes chilling reality thanks to the mysterious powers of "The Philosopher's Stone"!

ALSO IN JULY

July also features the return of one of the genre's finest talents, **Michael Bishop**, with his haunting allegory on the loss of a loved one, "Vinegar Peace, or, The Wrong-Way Used-Adult Orphanage"; **R. Neube** returns with a funny and scathing take on the complications of love in a tightened-belt society of interplanetary colonists in "Cascading Violet Hair"; **Gord Sellar**, making a memorable *Asimov's* debut, takes us on a long, strange trip around the Solar System with an unlikely cadre of jazz legends in "Lester Young and the Jupiter's Moons' Blues"; **Kij Johnson** submits a clever meditation on the fleeting nature of human (and simian) happiness in "26 Monkeys, also the Abyss"; and **Steven Utley** contributes the latest in his "Silurian Tales" sequence with the frightfully cold equations of "The Woman Under the World."

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

We bring back our Thought Experiments column in July with a personal, inspirational essay by **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** regarding the historic Moon landing in "When the Whole World Looked Up"; **Robert Silverberg**, in his "Reflections" column, continues his exploration of Golden Age SF in "Rereading Stapledon II"; **Paul Di Filippo** presents "On Books"; plus an array of pleasant poetry by many of your favorite poets. Look for our July issue at your newsstand on May 13, 2008. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—by mail or online, in varying formats, including downloadable forms, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com—and make sure that you don't miss any of the great stuff we have coming up!

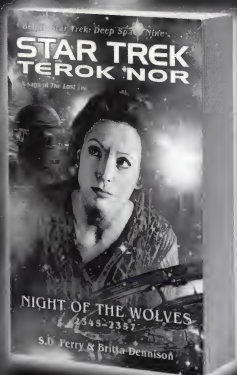
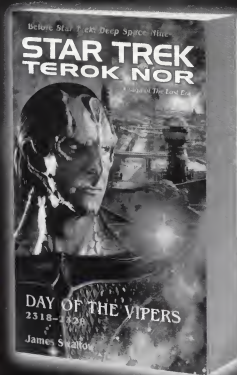
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